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# SCREEN 25 YEARS

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# MELODRAMA, SERIAL FORM AND TELEVISION TODAY

JANE FEUER EXAMINES  
'DALLAS', 'DYNASTY' AND THEIR  
CRITICAL CONTEXT

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1976, pp 11-12.

<sup>2</sup> American national network television is divided into two major time periods, each of which has its own corporate division and advertising policies, as well as specific programme types. Daytime lasts from about 10 am until 4 pm. Its main fare consists of soap operas, quiz programmes and talk shows. Prime-time, so called because it is the 'prime' viewing period with the largest audiences and highest advertising rates, lasts from 8-11pm. Most prime-time programmes have traditionally been episodic series, with the major

'THE INDULGENCE of strong emotionalism; moral polarization and schematization; extreme states of being, situations, action; overt villainy, persecution of the good, and final reward of virtue; inflated and extravagant expression; dark plottings, suspense, breathtaking peripety' . . . What Peter Brooks calls the 'everyday connotations' of the term 'melodrama'<sup>1</sup> describes almost perfectly the current form-in-dominance on American network television: the continuing serial or 'soap opera'. Although only a few years ago there seemed to be no equivalent on prime-time television<sup>2</sup> to the film melodramas of the 1950s recently rescued from obscurity by film theorists, we now find the domestic melodrama encroaching upon the domain of the sitcom and the cop show. At the same time, daytime soap operas are expanding, having risen to an astonishing peak of popularity.<sup>3</sup> Indeed awareness of their own significance seems to have reached the producers of daytime dramas. In a 1982 broadcast of the immensely popular daytime soap *All My Children*, a young woman character, Silver Kane, begged her sister's lover to get her a part on a soap, explaining what an honour that would be—they even teach them in college, she tells him, as a form of 'folk drama'.

For the purposes of this article, I am choosing to stress the similarities between daytime soaps and the prime-time continuing melodramatic serials such as *Dallas*, *Dynasty*, *Falcon Crest*, *Knots Landing*, *Flamingo Road* and the short-lived *Bare Essence*. I do this because I feel they have overriding similarities in terms of the theories I will discuss. Daytime and prime-time serials share a narrative form consisting of multiple plot lines and a continuing narrative (no closure). Both concentrate on the domestic sphere, although the prime-time serials also encompass the world of business and power (designed to appeal to the greater number of males in the evening viewing audience).

However, there are significant differences between the two forms, some of which will come out in my discussion. In *The Soap Opera*,

Muriel Cantor and Suzanne Pingree do not consider the prime-time programmes or other related programmes (e.g. limited serials such as the British *Forsyte Saga* or US mini-series) to fit their definition of soap opera.<sup>4</sup> They believe the primary difference is one of 'content'. Prime-time serials, they state, have a less conservative morality, deal with power and big business, and contain more action. They believe the most significant difference is that daytime soap operas are manifestations of women's culture, and prime-time serials are not. Although these are significant points, much of what I will argue in this paper transcends the distinction between the two forms. I would also argue that due to the influence of prime-time serials, many daytime soaps have added amoral wealthy families and faster action. Moreover, by excluding so many distant relatives of the daytime soap (including the serial cop show *Hill Street Blues* and the serial medical show *St Elsewhere*), Cantor and Pingree are unable to stress the pervasive influence of serial form and multiple plot structure upon *all* of American television. I will use the term 'television melodrama' to encompass both and to exclude other program types which take the form of episodic series as opposed to continuing serials.

Fortunately, we need not start from scratch in studying the new form of the prime-time melodramatic serial. Melodrama has flourished before, and we can benefit from the body of ideas surrounding Hollywood melodramas of the 1950s. I would like to begin by surveying and offering a critique of that theory, and then go on to consider its possible applications to the prime-time continuing serials *Dallas* and *Dynasty*.

Initially, critical interest in the films of Sirk bore little relationship to interest in the still-despised genre in which he most often worked. Quite the contrary: interest in Sirk stemmed from an extreme formalist tendency in *auteur* criticism, an attempt to bypass the narrative level in order to capture pure expressivity through *mise-en-scène*. *Mise-en-scène* critics were drawn to Sirk (as to other melodramatists such as Minnelli and Ophüls) for the way in which his style seemed to transcend the narrative level. In a much more sophisticated way, interest in style seemingly for its own sake dominated expositions of Sirk's films in several articles in the 1972 Edinburgh booklet on Sirk<sup>5</sup>, extending positions taken in the Summer 1971 issue of *Screen*<sup>6</sup>. One of these essays, Paul Willemen's 'Distanciation and Douglas Sirk', links the early interest in Sirk as a stylist to a new interest in a level of style which precludes audience identification in the usual sense.<sup>7</sup> Because this 'Brechtian' position haunts Sirk criticism from this point on, it is worth summarising in some detail.

Willemen explains Sirk's style as an 'intensification' of generic practices, not as irony *per se*. Since he had to appeal to a mass audience, Sirk drew on Expressionist and Brechtian theatrical experience 'not to break the rules... but to intensify them'. According to Willemen, this was accomplished through the magnification of emotionality, use of pathos, choreography and music, and through aspects of *mise-en-scène* such as 'mirror-ridden walls'. Such intensification puts a distance, though not necessarily one perceived by the audience, between 'the film and its nar-

genres being the situation comedy and action-adventure drama. *Dallas* started a trend toward continuing serial dramas in prime-time.

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<sup>3</sup> US daytime serials are broadcast in the late morning and early afternoon on all three networks, five days/week, 52 weeks/year. Each day about 25 million viewers, 80% of whom are women, watch them (*World Almanac*, 1982). In 1982 there were 13 daytime soap operas on the air, most of an hour's duration.

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<sup>4</sup> Beverley Hills, Sage Publications, 1983.

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<sup>5</sup> Laura Mulvey and Jon Halliday (eds), *Douglas Sirk*, Edinburgh Film Festival, 1972.

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<sup>6</sup> The formalist positions taken by David Grosz and Fred Camper are summarized in Jean-Loup Bourget, 'Sirk and the Critics', *Bright Lights* 2, Winter 1977-78, pp 6-11.

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Willemen, 'Distanciation and Douglas Sirk', *Screen*, Summer 1971, vol 12 no 2, pp 63-67. Republished in Mulvey and Halliday, *op cit*.

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<sup>8</sup> *ibid* p 28.

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<sup>9</sup> Especially since none of the authors I discuss offer as a 'control group' a detailed comparison to other 1950s melodramas similar to those of Sirk, Ray, and Minnelli, e.g. *Hilda Crane* (directed by Philip Dunne, 1956) or *Peyton Place* (directed by Mark Robson, 1957).

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rative pretext'. Even if not perceived by the mass audience, Willemen argues, distanciation 'may still exist within the film itself'. According to this view, a discrepancy exists between the audience Sirk is aiming at and the audience he knows will come to his films. The 'formalist' critics had also conceptualised a rupture between the narrative/dramatic and the filmic codes in Sirk. Willemen's hypothesis gives us an explanation for this rupture.

Following Willemen's logic, one must conceptualise a Sirk film as two films in one. The 'primary' text, the one which the mass audience will read and which consists of the narrative level, is melodrama, pure and simple. Whereas the secondary text springs from the distance 'intensification' opens up between Sirk's formal level and his narrative/dramatic generic level. For melodrama itself, according to this line of reasoning, lies fully within the 'dominant ideology'. Stylisation, Willemen argues, 'can also be used to parody the stylistic procedures which traditionally convey an extremely smug, self-righteous and *petit bourgeois* world view paramount in the American melodrama'.<sup>8</sup> Willemen proceeds to place Sirk's work in the category of films which – according to the well-known classification system of post-'68 *Cahiers* – turns out to be ambiguous in terms of the dominant ideology even though, at first glance, they may seem to rest fully within such an ideology.

This is the theoretical justification for Willemen's interest in Sirk and the way in which formalist readings of Sirk's films may be linked to a new interest in film as ideology. To put it in terms of the 'two texts', the primary Sirk text is fully within the dominant ideology because the narrative/dramatic level consists of pure melodrama, indistinguishable from any run-of-the-mill Hollywood melodrama (indeed two of Sirk's most lauded films were remakes). It is the secondary text, which, through authorial intervention at the level of *mise-en-scène* is subversive of this dominant ideology. However, in actual practice, distinguishing between the two texts can be difficult.<sup>9</sup> If it is true that only an *auteur* such as Sirk is capable of bringing stylistic pressure to bear upon the purely ideological melodramatic material and thus causing it to 'rupture' and reveal its own textual gaps in terms of the dominant ideology, then only an elite audience, indeed one already committed to subversive ideas, would be able to read the secondary text. Such a position does not explicate the spectator position melodrama allows for its intended audience.

Out of this impasse emerged a number of theoretical articles which, while retaining notions of distanciation and rupture, nevertheless shifted the emphasis from a specifically authorial and intentional subversive practice to the idea that melodrama *qua* melodrama contained the potential for exposing contradictions in the dominant ideology and for readings 'against the grain'. These new feminist and psychoanalytical readings open up the possibility of application to the distinctly non-authorial texts of American network television.

A close relationship between melodrama as a form and the ideology of capitalism had already been stressed in Thomas Elsaesser's influential 1973 article 'Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family

Melodrama'. Elsaesser traces the roots of the 1950s family melodrama to the eighteenth and nineteenth century sentimental novel in order to show that the form has always been embedded in a social context:

*an element of interiorisation and personalisation of what are primarily ideological conflicts, together with the metaphorical interpretation of class-conflict as sexual exploitation and rape, is important in all subsequent forms of melodrama.*<sup>10</sup>

Elsaesser argues that melodrama functions as either subversive or escapist relative to the given historical and social context. It is also relative to where the emphasis lies—upon the ideological conflicts or upon the happy ending.<sup>11</sup> Several other critics took up this emphasis on the exposure of contradictions, although they disagree as to whether the form is ultimately subversive or not. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith gave the debate a psychoanalytical slant, arguing that the audience knew the happy endings in melodramas were often impossible: 'a happy end which takes the form of an acceptance of castration is achieved only at the cost of repression.'<sup>12</sup> According to Nowell-Smith's view,

*the importance of melodrama lies precisely in its ideological failure. Because it cannot accommodate its problems either in a real present or an ideal future, but lays them open in their contradictoriness, it opens a space which most Hollywood films have studiously closed off.*<sup>13</sup>

Yet, other critics questioned the nature of the 'space' thus opened. In a feminist reading of Sirk, Laura Mulvey suggested that melodrama as a form opens up contradictions in bourgeois ideology in the domestic sphere. However, she sees the purpose of opening ideological contradictions as providing a 'safety valve' rather than as progressive. Mulvey believes this view of melodrama places it 'in the context of wider problems'.<sup>14</sup> One of these wider problems would be the relationship between melodrama as a form and the capitalist social formation. According to Chuck Kleinhans, the raw material of any melodrama consists in exposing contradictions of capitalism in the personal sphere. Kleinhans believes that the main contradiction melodrama explores is the expectation that the family should fulfill all needs society can't fill. His conclusion is that melodramas offer artistic presentations of genuine problems but locate these problems in the family, the place where they can't be solved. He sees melodrama as serving an important function for women in capitalist society, but seems its form as ultimately self-defeating.<sup>15</sup>

A few currents run consistently through the shifting theoretical viewpoints just delineated. Melodrama seemed amenable to a variety of theoretical approaches because melodramas seemed to encourage different levels of reading to a greater extent than did other 'classical narrative' films. Traditionally male-oriented genres such as the western or the gangster film did not problematise the reader in the same way as melodrama. Thus few articles appeared on 'The Western and the Male Spectator'. If one assumes, as early studies of male genres did, a non-

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, 'Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama', *Monogram* no 4, 1973, p 3.

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid* p 4.

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<sup>12</sup> Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, 'Minnelli and Melodrama', *Screen Summer* 1977, vol 18 no 2, p 117.

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<sup>13</sup> *ibid* p 118.

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<sup>14</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Douglas Sirk and Melodrama', *Movie* no 25, Winter 1977-78, p 53.

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<sup>15</sup> Chuck Kleinhans, 'Notes on Melodrama and the Family Under Capitalism', *Film Reader* 3, 1978 pp 40-48.

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<sup>16</sup> As noted by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *op cit.*

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<sup>17</sup> I am indebted to the Melodrama Seminar at the 1981 British Film Institute Summer School for this point, and especially to Charlotte Brunson for the idea that 'melodrama' consists of an 'ideological problematic' and a 'mode of address', so that it may manifest itself in different forms in different historical periods.

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problematic and universalised male subject, then westerns and gangster films can be studied by means of the textually-based structuralism in vogue during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Melodrama, in problematising questions of spectatorship and gender, demands reader-response based modes of analysis such as psychoanalysis.

Central to all the theoretical positions I have just enumerated is the concept of melodrama as creating an *excess*, whether that excess be defined as a split between the level of narrative and that of *mise-en-scène* or as a form of 'hysteria', the visually articulated return of the ideologically repressed. Despite the changing theoretical stances, all see the excess not merely as aesthetic but as *ideological*, opening up a textual space which may be read against the seemingly hegemonic surface. The key text for the theorisation of visual excess has tended to be Sirk's *Written on the Wind* with its intricately layered (and thus visually ruptured) mirror shots, phallic symbolism and 'hysterical' montage. More than any other film this oil dynasty saga seems to provide a prototype for *Dallas* and *Dynasty*. More than any other Sirk film *Written on the Wind* seems to occupy the same representational field as today's prime-time serial melodramas. Unlike Sirk's other melodramas and also unlike daytime soap operas, *Written on the Wind*, *Dallas* and *Dynasty* focus on the capitalist ruling elite rather than the bourgeois family. The address is not so uniformly from one bourgeois to another as it is in other forms of melodrama.<sup>16</sup> (Although of course the representation of the upper classes is intended to be *read* by a bourgeois audience.) Despite the similarity of representational field, today's prime-time melodrama does not take the same visual and narrative form as *Written on the Wind*. Unlike the texts upon which much of the theory of film melodrama has been constructed, *Dallas*, *Dynasty* and their imitators appear to lack visual excess as it has been described in the fifties family melodrama.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, they lack another element crucial to theories of textual deficiencies which run counter to the dominant ideology – that is to say, they lack closure.

Is there a potential for reading *Dallas* and *Dynasty* in terms of excesses and contradictions? Are these programmes the conventional domestic melodramas of their time which now seek an *auteur* to subvert them? Or do they already contain the potential for subversive readings? In the analysis that follows I will focus on some of the conventions employed in episodes from the 1981-82 seasons of *Dallas* and *Dynasty*. (The dates used throughout are for US seasons, rather than British transmissions.) My argument will be that excess needs to be defined not in terms of the norms for films of the fifties but rather in terms of those for television of the seventies.

Seen in terms of their own medium, the seemingly simple *mise-en-scène* and editing style of the prime-time serials takes on a new signification. Although *mise-en-scène* in *Dallas* and *Dynasty* does not take on the hysterical dimensions of a Sirk or Fassbinder film it does seem at the very least *opulent* compared to other prime-time programmes and certainly compared to the daytime soaps. Budgetary considerations alone show the emphasis placed on *mise-en-scène*. According to one source, '*Dynasty* costs approximately one million dollars an hour because of the

show's cavernous and opulent sets, not to mention the dazzling fashions worn by cast members.<sup>18</sup> While there is nothing inherently subversive about such splendour, it does serve to take the family dynasty serials outside the normal upper-middle class milieu of most film and television melodrama. The very rich portrayed in these narratives exceed the norms of their audience both economically and morally; luxurious *mise-en-scène* objectifies such excess. But in order to fulfil the theory that excess leads to a counter-current in the text, some authorial voice would need to use the visual excess against the narrative level. This does not appear to happen. Although the programmes appear to be aware of their own splendid tackiness, they do not appear to set out explicitly to subvert any generic codes, as did the comic parody *Soap* or the ambiguously conventional version of daytime soaps *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*.

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<sup>18</sup> *Soap Opera Digest* 7, December 7, 1982, p 141.

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Opulent *mise-en-scène*: the cavernous drawing room in *Dynasty*.

For *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, *mise-en-scène* would appear to function for the most part expressively, as in the so-called conventional film melodramas. For example, an unusually complex 'layered' composition in *Dynasty* featured Alexis Carrington in the foreground of the frame arranging flowers in her ex-husband's drawing room as Krystle, the current Mrs Carrington and Alexis' arch-rival, enters to the rear of the frame carrying an identical flower arrangement. The flowers externalise the emotions of the characters without in any way splitting the perception of the viewer. Another episode of *Dynasty* featured a classically Oedipal composition as Fallon, the father-fixated daughter, and her father Blake Carrington kiss over her baby's crib as Fallon's husband enters into the centre of the composition. To be sure, character relationships of an 'hysterical' nature are expressed, but the *mise-en-scène* represents this hysteria rather than being itself hysterical and thus calling into question that which is represented.

Excess in prime-time serials cannot easily centre upon *mise-en-scène*, for television's limited visual scale places its representational emphasis

Expressive *mise-en-scène*: the rival flower arrangements of *Dynasty*'s Alexis (foreground) and Krystle Carrington.



elsewhere. Acting, editing, musical underscoring and the use of the zoom lens frequently conspire to create scenes of high (melo)drama, even more so when these televisual conventions are overdetermined by heavily psychoanalytical representations. If, as David Thorburn has written, all television acting is operatic, then prime-time soap opera acting must be positively Wagnerian.<sup>19</sup> In fact it is the acting conventions of soap opera which are most often ridiculed for their excess, their seeming to transgress the norms for a 'realistic' television acting style. Compared to Peter Brooks' description of melodramatic acting in the nineteenth century French theatre with its eye-rolling and teeth-gnashing, acting on TV serials approaches minimalism; nevertheless it appears excessive in comparison to the more naturalistic mode currently employed in other forms of television and in the cinema, just as the overblown 'bad acting' in Sirk's films did for its time.<sup>20</sup> Yet both forms of melodramatic acting are in keeping with related conventions for distilling and intensifying emotion.

On *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, as on daytime soaps, the majority of scenes consist of intense emotional confrontations between individuals closely related either by blood or by marriage. Most scenes are filmed in medium close-up to give full reign to emotionality without obscuring the decor. The hyper-intensity of each confrontation is accentuated by a use of underscoring not found in any other TV genre, and by conventions of exchanged glances, shot duration and the zoom lens. Although television does not often avail itself of the elaborate moving camera and mirror shots Sirk employed in the fifties (and Fassbinder in the seventies) to Brechtian effect, these televisual codes appear to serve many of the same functions in terms of exceeding the norms of their medium.

Following and exaggerating a convention of daytime soaps, *Dallas* and *Dynasty* typically hold a shot on the screen for at least a 'beat' after the dialogue has ended, usually in combination with shot-reverse shot cuts between the actors' locked gazes. This conventional manner of closing a

<sup>19</sup> David Thorburn, 'Television Melodrama', in Horace Newcomb (ed), *Television: The Critical View*, Third Edition, New York, Oxford University Press, 1982, p 536.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Brooks, op cit, p 47.

scene (usually accompanied by a dramatic burst of music) leaves a residue of emotional intensity just prior to a scene change or commercial break. It serves as a form of punctuation, signifying momentary closure, but it also carries meaning within the scene, a meaning connected to the intense interpersonal involvements each scene depicts. Another intensifying technique adapted from daytime drama is the use of zooms-in of varying speeds and durations, with the fast zoom-in to freeze frame being the most dramatic, as when it is used on a close-up of JR at the finale of most episodes of *Dallas*. For coding moments of 'peak' hysteria, *Dallas* and *Dynasty* will employ repeated zooms-in to close-ups of all actors in a scene. Reserved for moments of climactic intensity, this technique was used to create the end-of season cliffhanger for the 1981-82 season of



Emotional confrontation:  
Krystle (top) and  
Alexis Carrington  
lock gazes in close-up.





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<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Christopher Orr, 'Closure and Containment: Marylee Hadley in *Written on the Wind*', *Wide Angle* vol 4, no 2, pp 28-35.

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<sup>22</sup> Dennis Porter, 'Soap Time: Thoughts on a Commodity Art Form', *College English* 38, 1977, p 783.

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<sup>23</sup> This issue is addressed in Tania Modleski, 'The Search for Tomorrow in Today's Soap Operas', *Film Quarterly*, vol 33 no 1 (1979), pp 17-18.

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*Dynasty*. In this case the climax was both narrative and sexual, with the zooms used on the injured Blake Carrington intercut with scenes of Alexis Carrington making love to Blake's enemy Cecil Colby. *Dallas* employed a similar device in a scene where JR finally accepts his father's death and we zoom repeatedly to a portrait of Jock on the wall at Southfork.

But it would be misleading to discuss clotal conventions as excessive without considering their relationship to the narrative/dramatic structure. For, as we have seen, moments of melodramatic excess relate to the serial structure of these dramas and occur as a form of temporary closure within and between episodes and even entire seasons. It is serial form, even more than visual conventions, which most distinguishes the contemporary television melodrama from its cinematic predecessors. And it is over the issue of serial form that arguments similar to the Brechtian and feminist positions on Sirk have been proposed in recent theories of daytime serials.

A concept of closure is crucial to an argument that the 'happy endings' in Sirk's films fail to contain their narrative excess, allowing contradictions in the text to remain exposed. According to several articles on this subject, the contradictions seemingly burst through the weakly knit textual seams, rendering closure ineffective. In this view a successful closure of the narrative would be seen as ideologically complicit with a 'smug, *petit bourgeois*' view of the world. However the Sirk melodramas question that world view by leaving contradictions unresolved.<sup>21</sup> But what becomes of this argument when the representational field of melodrama takes the form of a serial drama that has no real beginning or end but only (as one critic describes it) 'an indefinitely expandable middle'<sup>22</sup>? Since serials offer only temporary resolutions, it could be argued that the teleological metaphysics of classical narrative structure have been subverted.<sup>23</sup> The moral universe of the prime-time serials is one in which the good can never ultimately receive their just rewards, yet evil can never wholly triumph. Any ultimate resolution—for good or for ill—goes against the only moral imperative of the continuing serial form: the plot must go on. A moment of resolution in a serial drama is experienced in a very different way from the closure of a classical narrative film. Compare, for example, the ending of *Written on the Wind* to the re-marriage of JR and Sue Ellen Ewing in the 1982-83 plotline of *Dallas*. When, at the end of the Sirk film, Rock Hudson and Lauren Bacall drive off together, the meaning is ambiguous because too much has been exposed to allow us to believe they will live simply and happily ever after. However, any speculation about the 'afterlife' of the characters that a viewer might indulge in is just that, speculation. When on the other hand, Sue Ellen approaches the altar and JR, we feel a sense of impending doom (accentuated by having Cliff Barnes rise up in protest as a cliffhanger) that we *know* will be fulfilled in future plotlines.

Marriage—with its consequent integration into the social order—is never viewed as a symbol of narrative closure as it is in so many comic forms. Indeed to be happily married on a serial is to be on the periphery



Closure: the credits roll over the finale freeze on JR in *Dallas*.



Climax: close-up on *Dynasty*'s Alexis Carrington as she attempts to revive Cecil Colby from a post-coital heart attack.

of the narrative. There are moments of equilibrium and even joy on TV serials, but in general we know that every happy marriage is eventually headed for divorce and that the very existence of the continuing serial rests upon the premise that 'all my children' cannot be happy at once.<sup>24</sup> Thus the fate of various couples depends not upon any fixed and eternal character traits, e.g. good/evil, happy/sad, but rather upon a curious fulcrum principle in relationship to other couples in the current plotline. Characters who represent the societal 'good' of happy monogamy with a desire to procreate are just as miserable as the fornicators. During the 1982-83 season, the two marriages that seemed above the vagaries of intrigue – those of Pam and Bobby Ewing, and Blake and Krystle Carrington – were torn asunder by obviously contrived plot devices. Even the implicit moral goodness of a character such as Pamela was called into

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<sup>24</sup> See Tania Modleski, *Loving With a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women*, Hamden, Connecticut, The Shoe String Press, 1982, p 90.

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question. In the plutocracies of *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, as in the more bourgeois worlds of daytime soaps, happy marriage does not make for interesting plot complications.

From this it might be argued that prime-time family dynasty serials in particular offer a criticism of the institution of bourgeois marriage, since marital happiness is never shown as a final state. Wedded bliss is desirable but also unobtainable. Moreover, that cornerstone of bourgeois morality – marriage for love – also appears to be demystified. Both *Dallas* and *Dynasty* deal with the economics of multinational corporations but they do so in terms of the familial conflicts which control the destinies of these companies. This is typical of the domestic melodrama's oft-noted tendency to portray all ideological conflicts in terms of the family. However, *Dallas* and *Dynasty* also depict the family in economic terms, thus apparently demystifying the middle-class notion of marriage based upon romantic love (e.g. JR's remarrying of Sue Ellen in order to regain control of his son and heir; the Byzantine interweavings of the Colby and Carrington empires in *Dynasty*). In one episode of *Dynasty*, Blake Carrington buys his wife, Krystle, a new Rolls Royce, telling her that he is giving her the Rolls because she is giving him a child. This would seem to reduce their love to a financial contract, thus exposing its material basis. Yet in a sense these characters are beyond bourgeois morality because they represent the ruling class. One critic has offered the interpretation that the transgressions of the *nouveau riche* decadents of prime-time ultimately serve to reinforce bourgeois norms:

*Dallas, Dynasty and Falcon Crest give us the satisfaction of feeling superior to them: We can look down on their skewed values and perverted family lives from the high ground of middle-class respectability. When Angela Channing (Falcon Crest) coolly threatens to disinherit her grandson if he won't wed a woman he despises (the marriage would tighten*

Decadent or demystifying? A grateful Blake Carrington presents pregnant wife Krystle with a new Rolls Royce.



her hold on the valley's wine industry), our own superior respect for love and marriage is confirmed. The prime-time soaps also confirm the suspicion that great wealth and power are predicated on sin, and, even more satisfying, don't buy happiness anyway.<sup>25</sup>

How can the same programmes yield up such diametrically opposed readings? According to two recent feminist studies, serial form and multiple plot structure appear to give TV melodrama a greater potential for multiple and aberrant readings than do other forms of popular narrative.<sup>26</sup> Since no action is irreversible, every ideological position may be countered by its opposite. Thus the family dynasty sagas may be read either as critical of the dominant ideology of capitalism or as belonging to it, depending upon the position from which the reader comes at it.

Of course most US television programmes are structured to appeal to a broad mass audience and to avoid offending any segment of that audience. The 'openness' of TV texts does not in and of itself represent a salutary or progressive stance. Nevertheless, I would argue that the continuing melodramatic serial seems to offer an especially active role for the spectator, even in comparison to the previous decade's form-in-dominance, the socially-conscious situation comedy of the early-mid '70s.<sup>27</sup> The popular press bemoaned the transition from these 'quality' sitcoms to 'mindless' comedies and 'escapist' serials later in the decade. The popular sitcoms of the 1970s—for example, Norman Lear's *All in the Family* and *Maude*, and MTM Enterprises' *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Rhoda*—were engaged with their times, often to the point of encompassing overtly political themes with a progressive bent. *Dallas* and *Dynasty* seem by contrast to be conservative Republican programmes. The article cited above goes on to argue that prime-time soaps duplicate the imagery of Reaganism and reinforce its ideology.

... both imply that the American dream of self-made success is alive and might be made well by releasing the frontier instincts of the wealthy from the twin shackles of taxes and regulation.<sup>28</sup>

Although the sitcoms contained overtly liberal 'messages', their strong drive toward narrative closure tended to mask contradictions and force a false sense of social integration by the end of each episode. For example, the problems raised by *All in the Family* had to have easy solutions within the family so that a new 'topical' issue could be introduced in the next episode. TV critic Michael J Arlen has described this phenomenon very well in his essay, 'The Media Dramas of Norman Lear':

*Modern, psychiatrically inspired or induced ambivalence may, indeed, be the key dramatic principle behind this new genre of popular entertainment. A step is taken, and then a step back. A gesture is made and then withdrawn—blurred into distracting laughter, or somehow forgotten. This seems especially true in the area of topicality...*<sup>29</sup>

(It is no accident, I believe, that Norman Lear's subsequent (1976) venture into social satire took the form of the continuing serial *Mary Hart-*

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<sup>25</sup> Michael Pollan, 'The Season of the Reagan Rich', *Channels of Communications* 2, November/December 1982, pp 14-15.

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<sup>26</sup> Tania Modleski, *Loving With a Vengeance*, op cit, and Ellen Seiter, 'Eco's TV Guide—the Soaps', *Tabloid* 5, Winter 1982, pp 35-43.

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<sup>27</sup> This is not to imply a quantitative conception of dominance. Rather, I'm referring to a hegemonic form, one which appears to be at the centre of a decade's ideology.

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<sup>28</sup> Michael Pollan, op cit, p 86.

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<sup>29</sup> Michael J Arlen, 'The Media Dreams of Norman Lear', *The View from Highway 1*, New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1974, p 59.

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man, *Mary Hartman*; nor that both *Mary Hartman* and *Soap* (1977) blended situation comedy with elements of melodrama.)

Prime-time melodramas by contrast can never *resolve* contradictions by containing them within the family, since the family is the very site of economic struggle and moral corruption. In these serials, the corruption of the very rich much more often stands exposed and remains exposed. If, for example, Blake Carrington reconciles with his homosexual son, it does not represent an easy resolution to or liberal blurring of the challenge Stephen's gayness poses to the disposal of the Carrington fortune. The temporary reconciliation merely portends yet another breach between father and son which does in fact ensue when Stephen takes his son and moves in with his male lover.

To put it schematically, the 1970s sitcoms dealt with liberal 'messages' within a narrative form (the episodic series sitcom) limited by its own conservatism. The prime-time serials reverse this, bearing what appears to be a right-wing ideology by means of a potentially progressive narrative form. This is not to imply that narrative forms *in themselves* structure the ideologies of an era. Quite the contrary. It would seem that the multiplication of social contradictions in the 1980s could not be expressed within the boundaries of the situation comedy. Narrative forms *do* have expressive limitations, and, in the case at hand, one can correlate a shift in the dominant narrative form of American network television with a shift in sensibilities outside the text. This is not to say, as many have argued, that the new serials represent a turning away from social concerns. The emergence of the melodramatic serial in the 1980s represents a *radical* response to and expression of cultural contradictions. Whether that response is interpreted to the Right or to the Left is not a question the texts themselves can answer.

Reconciliation  
without resolution:  
Blake Carrington  
visits his homosexual  
son Stephen in  
hospital.



The photographs in this article were taken by Kevin Brunelle.



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# WOMEN'S GENRES

## ANNETTE KUHN CONSIDERS MELODRAMA, SOAP OPERA AND THEORY

## I

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<sup>1</sup> Muriel G Cantor and Suzanne Pingree, *The Soap Opera*, Beverley Hills, Sage Publications, 1983, p 22. Here 'soap opera' refers to daytime (US) or early evening (UK) serials... not prime-time serials like *Dallas* and *Dynasty*.

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TELEVISION SOAP OPERA and film melodrama, popular narrative forms aimed at female audiences, are currently attracting a good deal of critical and theoretical attention. Not surprisingly, most of the work on these 'gynocentric' genres is informed by various strands of feminist thought on visual representation. Less obviously, perhaps, such work has also prompted a series of questions which relate to representation and cultural production in a more wide-ranging and thoroughgoing manner than a specifically feminist interest might suggest. Not only are film melodrama (and more particularly its subtype the 'woman's picture') and soap opera directed at female audiences, they are also actually enjoyed by millions of women. What is it that sets these genres apart from representations which possess a less gender-specific mass appeal?

One of the defining generic features of the woman's picture as a textual system is its construction of narratives motivated by female desire and processes of spectator identification governed by female point-of-view. Soap opera constructs woman-centred narratives and identifications, too, but it differs textually from its cinematic counterpart in certain other respects: not only do soaps never end, but their beginnings are 'soon lost sight of. And whereas in the woman's picture the narrative process is characteristically governed by the enigma-retardation-resolution structure which marks the classic narrative, soap opera narratives propose

*competing and intertwining plot lines introduced as the serial progresses. Each plot... develops at a different pace, thus preventing any clear resolution of conflict. The completion of one story generally leads into others, and ongoing plots often incorporate parts of semi-resolved conflicts.*<sup>1</sup>

Recent work on soap opera and melodrama has drawn on existing theories, methods and perspectives in the study of film and television, including the structural analysis of narratives, textual semiotics and psychoanalysis, audience research, and the political economy of cultural

institutions. At the same time, though, some of this work has exposed the limitations of existing approaches, and in consequence been forced if not actually to abandon them, at least to challenge their characteristic problematics. Indeed, it may be contended that the most significant developments in film and TV theory in general are currently taking place precisely within such areas of feminist concern as critical work on soap opera and melodrama.

In examining some of this work, I shall begin by looking at three areas in which particularly pertinent questions are being directed at theories of representation and cultural production. These are, firstly, the problem of gendered spectatorship; secondly, questions concerning the universalism as against the historical specificity of conceptualisations of gendered spectatorship; and thirdly, the relationship between film and television texts and their social, historical and institutional contexts. Each of these concerns articulates in particular ways with what seems to me the central issue here – the question of the audience, or audiences, for certain types of cinematic and televisual representation.

## II

Film theory's appropriation to its own project of Freudian and post-Freudian psychoanalysis places the question of the relationship between text and spectator firmly on the agenda. Given the preoccupation of psychoanalysis with sexuality and gender, a move from conceptualising the spectator as a homogeneous and androgynous effect of textual operations<sup>2</sup> to regarding her or him as a gendered subject constituted in representation seems in retrospect inevitable. At the same time, the interests of feminist film theory and film theory in general converge at this point in a shared concern with sexual difference. Psychoanalytic accounts of the formation of gendered subjectivity raise the question, if only indirectly, of representation and feminine subjectivity. This in turn permits the spectator to be considered as a gendered subject position, masculine or feminine: and theoretical work on soap opera and the woman's picture may take this as a starting point for its inquiry into spectator-text relations. Do these 'gynocentric' forms address, or construct, a female or a feminine spectator? If so, how?

On the question of film melodrama, Laura Mulvey, commenting on King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun*<sup>3</sup>, argues that when, as in this film, a woman is at the centre of the narrative, the question of female desire structures the hermeneutic: 'what does *she* want?' This, says Mulvey, does not guarantee the constitution of the spectator as feminine so much as it implies a contradictory, and in the final instance impossible, 'phantasy of masculinisation' for the female spectator. This is in line with the author's earlier suggestion that cinema spectatorship involves masculine identification for spectators of either gender<sup>4</sup>. If cinema does thus construct a masculine subject, there can be no unproblematic feminine sub-

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<sup>2</sup> See Jean-Louis Baudry, 'Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus', *Film Quarterly* vol 28 no 2 (1974-5), pp 39-47; Christian Metz, 'The Imaginary Signifier', *Screen* Summer 1975, vol 16 no 2, pp 14-76.

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<sup>3</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"', *Framework* nos 15/16/17 (1981), pp 12-15.

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<sup>4</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen* Autumn 1975, vol 16 no 3, pp 6-18.

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- <sup>5</sup> Pam Cook, 'Melodrama and the Women's Picture', in Sue Aspinall and Robert Murphy (eds), *Gainsborough Melodrama*, London, BFI 1983, p 17.

- <sup>6</sup> Tania Modleski, *Loving With a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women*, Hamden Connecticut, The Shoe String Press, 1982, p 105. See also Tania Modleski, 'The Search for Tomorrow in Today's Soap Operas', *Film Quarterly* vol 33 no 1 (1979), pp 12-21.

ject position for any spectator. Pam Cook, on the other hand, writing about a group of melodramas produced during the 1940s at the Gainsborough Studios, evinces greater optimism about the possibility of a feminine subject of classic cinema. She does acknowledge, though, that in a patriarchal society female desire and female point-of-view are highly contradictory, even if they have the potential to subvert culturally dominant modes of spectator-text relation. The characteristic 'excess' of the woman's melodrama, for example, is explained by Cook in terms of the genre's tendency to '[pose] problems for itself which it can scarcely contain.'<sup>5</sup>

Writers on TV soap opera tend to take views on gender and spectatorship rather different from those advanced by film theorists. Tania Modleski, for example, argues with regard to soaps that their characteristic narrative patterns, their foregrounding of 'female' skills in dealing with personal and domestic crises, and the capacity of their programme formats and scheduling to key into the rhythms of women's work in the home, all address a female spectator. Furthermore, she goes as far as to argue that the textual processes of soaps are in some respects similar to those of certain 'feminine' texts which speak to a decentred subject, and so are 'not altogether at odds with ... feminist aesthetics'.<sup>6</sup> Modleski's view is that soaps not only address female spectators, but in so doing construct feminine subject positions which transcend patriarchal modes of subjectivity.



Female desire in *Duel in the Sun*: an impossible phantasy of masculinisation for the female spectator?

Different though their respective approaches and conclusions might be, however, Mulvey, Cook and Modleski are all interested in the problem of gendered spectatorship. The fact, too, that this common concern is informed by a shared interest in assessing the progressive or transformative potential of soaps and melodramas is significant in light of the broad appeal of both genres to the mass audiences of women at which they are aimed.

But what precisely does it mean to say that certain representations are aimed at a female audience? However well theorised they may be, existing conceptualisations of gendered spectatorship are unable to deal with this question. This is because spectator and audience are distinct concepts which cannot – as they frequently are – be reduced to one another. Although I shall be considering some of its consequences more fully below (in part III), it is important to note a further problem for film and television theory, posed in this case by the distinction between spectator and audience. Critical work on the woman's picture and on soap opera has necessarily, and most productively, emphasised the question of gendered spectatorship. In doing this, film theory in particular has taken on board a conceptualisation of the spectator derived from psychoanalytic accounts of the formation of human subjectivity.

Such accounts, however, have been widely criticised for their universalism. Beyond, perhaps, associating certain variants of the Oedipus complex with family forms characteristic of a patriarchal society and offering a theory of the construction of gender, psychoanalysis seems to offer little scope for theorising subjectivity in its cultural or historical specificity. Although in relation to the specific issues of spectatorship and representation there may, as I shall argue, be a way around this apparent impasse, virtually all film and TV theory – its feminist variants included – is marked by the dualism of universalism and specificity.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the gulf between textual analysis and contextual inquiry. Each is done according to different rules and procedures, distinct methods of investigation and theoretical perspectives. In bringing to the fore the question of spectator-text relations, theories deriving from psychoanalysis may claim – to the extent that the spectatorial apparatus is held to be coterminous with the cinematic or televisual institution – to address the relationship between text and context. But as soon as any attempt is made to combine textual analysis with analysis of the concrete social, historical and institutional conditions of production and reception of texts, it becomes clear that the context of the spectator/subject of psychoanalytic theory is rather different from the context of production and reception constructed by conjunctural analyses of cultural institutions.

The disparity between these two 'contexts' structures Pam Cook's article on the Gainsborough melodrama, which sets out to combine an analysis of the characteristic textual operations and modes of address of a genre with an examination of the historical conditions of a particular expression of it. Gainsborough melodrama, says Cook, emerges from a complex of determinants, including certain features of the British film industry of the 1940s, the nature of the female cinema audience in the

post World War II period, and the textual characteristics of the woman's picture itself.<sup>7</sup> While Cook is correct in pointing to the various levels of determination at work in this instance, her lengthy preliminary discussion of spectator-text relations and the woman's picture rather outbalances her subsequent investigation of the social and industrial contexts of the Gainsborough melodrama. The fact, too, that analysis of the woman's picture in terms of its interpellation of a female/feminine spectator is simply placed alongside a conjunctural analysis tends to vitiate any attempt to reconcile the two approaches, and so to deal with the broader issue of universalism as against historical specificity. But although the initial problem remains, Cook's article constitutes an important intervention in the debate because, in tackling the text-context split head-on, it necessarily exposes a key weakness of current film theory.

In work on television soap opera as opposed to film melodrama, the dualism of text and context manifests itself rather differently, if only because – unlike film theory – theoretical work on television has tended to emphasise the determining character of the contextual level, particularly the structure and organisation of television institutions. Since this has often been at the expense of attention to the operation of TV texts, television theory may perhaps be regarded as innovative in the extent to which it attempts to deal specifically with texts as well as contexts. Some



Gainsborough Studios' *The Wicked Lady*: a potential challenge to dominant modes of spectatorship?

feminist critical work has in fact already begun to address the question of TV as text, though always with characteristic emphasis on the issue of gendered spectatorship. This emphasis constitutes a common concern of work on both TV soaps and the woman's picture, but a point of contact between text and context in either medium emerges only when the concept of social audience is considered in distinction from that of spectator.

### III

Each term – spectator and social audience – presupposes a different set of relations to representations and to the contexts in which they are received. Looking at spectators and at audiences demands different methodologies and theoretical frameworks, distinct discourses which construct distinct subjectivities and social relations. The *spectator*, for example, is a subject constituted in signification, interpellated by the film or TV text. This does not necessarily mean that the spectator is merely an effect of the text, however, because modes of subjectivity which also operate outside spectator-text relations in film or TV are activated in the relationship between spectators and texts.

This model of the spectator/subject is useful in correcting more deterministic communication models which might, say, pose the spectator not as actively constructing meaning but simply as a receiver and decoder of preconstituted 'messages'. In emphasising spectatorship as a set of psychic relations and focusing on the relationship between spectator and text, however, such a model does disregard the broader social implications of filmgoing or televiewing. It is the social act of going to the cinema, for instance, that makes the individual cinemagoer part of an audience. Viewing television may involve social relations rather different from filmgoing, but in its own ways TV does depend on individual viewers being part of an audience, even if its members are never in one place at the same time. A group of people seated in a single auditorium looking at a film, or scattered across thousands of homes watching the same television programme, is a *social audience*. The concept of social audience, as against that of spectator, emphasises the status of cinema and television as social and economic institutions.

Constructed by discursive practices both of cinema and TV and of social science, the social audience is a group of people who buy tickets at the box office, or who switch on their TV sets; people who can be surveyed, counted and categorised according to age, sex and socio-economic status.<sup>8</sup> The cost of a cinema ticket or TV licence fee, or a readiness to tolerate commercial breaks, earns audiences the right to look at films and TV programmes, and so to be spectators. Social audiences become spectators in the moment they engage in the processes and pleasures of meaning-making attendant on watching a film or TV programme. The anticipated pleasure of spectatorship is perhaps a necessary condition of existence of audiences. In taking part in the social act of consuming representations, a group of spectators becomes a social audience.

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<sup>8</sup> Methods and findings of social science research on the social audience for American daytime soap operas are discussed in Cantor and Pingree, *op cit*, Chapter 7.

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The consumer of representations as audience member and spectator is involved in a particular kind of psychic and social relationship: at this point, a conceptualisation of the cinematic or televisual apparatus as a regime of pleasure intersects with sociological and economic understandings of film and TV as institutions. Because each term describes a distinct set of relationships, though, it is important not to conflate social audience with spectators. At the same time, since each is necessary to the other, it is equally important to remain aware of the points of continuity between the two sets of relations.

These conceptualisations of spectator and social audience have particular implications when it comes to a consideration of popular 'gynocentric' forms such as soap opera and melodrama. Most obviously, perhaps, these centre on the issue of gender, which prompts again the question: what does 'aimed at a female audience' mean? What exactly is being signalled in this reference to a gendered audience? Are women to be understood as a subgroup of the social audience, distinguishable through discourses which construct *a priori* gender categories? Or does the reference to a female audience allude rather to gendered spectatorship, to sexual difference constructed in relations between spectators and texts? Most likely, it condenses the two meanings; but an examination of the distinction between them may nevertheless be illuminating in relation to the broader theoretical issues of texts, contexts, social audiences and spectators.

The notion of a female social audience, certainly as it is constructed in the discursive practices through which it is investigated, presupposes a group of individuals already formed as female. For the sociologist interested in such matters as gender and lifestyles, certain people bring a pre-existent femaleness to their viewing of film and TV. For the business executive interested in selling commodities, TV programmes and films are marketed to individuals already constructed as female. Both, however, are interested in the same kind of woman. On one level, then, soap operas and women's melodramas address themselves to a social audience of women. But they may at the same time be regarded as speaking to a female, or a feminine, spectator. If soaps and melodramas inscribe femininity in their address, women—as well as being already formed *for* such representations—are in a sense also formed *by* them.

In making this point, however, I intend no reduction of femaleness to femininity: on the contrary, I would hold to a distinction between femaleness as social gender and femininity as subject position. For example, it is possible for a female spectator to be addressed, as it were, 'in the masculine', and the converse is presumably also true. Nevertheless, in a culturally pervasive operation of ideology, femininity is routinely identified with femaleness and masculinity with maleness. Thus, for example, an address 'in the feminine' may be regarded in ideological terms as privileging, if not necessitating, a socially constructed female gender identity.

The constitutive character of both the woman's picture and the soap opera has in fact been noted by a number of feminist commentators.

Tania Modleski, for instance, suggests that the characteristic narrative structures and textual operations of soap operas both address the viewer as an 'ideal mother' – ever-understanding, ever-tolerant of the weaknesses and foibles of others – and also posit states of expectation and passivity as pleasurable:

*the narrative, by placing ever more complex obstacles between desire and fulfilment, makes anticipation of an end an end in itself.*<sup>9</sup>

In our culture, tolerance and passivity are regarded as feminine attributes, and consequently as qualities proper in women but not in men.

Charlotte Brunsdon extends Modleski's line of argument to the extra-textual level: in constructing its viewers as competent within the ideological and moral frameworks of marriage and family life, soap opera, she implies, addresses both a feminine spectator and female audience.<sup>10</sup> Pointing to the centrality of intuition and emotion in the construction of the woman's point-of-view, Pam Cook regards the construction of a feminine spectator as a highly problematic and contradictory process: so that in the film melodrama's construction of female point-of-view, the validity of femininity as a subject position is necessarily laid open to question.<sup>11</sup>

This divergence on the question of gendered spectatorship within feminist theory is significant. Does it perhaps indicate fundamental differences between film and television in the spectator-text relations privileged by each? Do soaps and melodramas really construct different relations of gendered spectatorship, with melodrama constructing contradictory identifications in ways that soap opera does not? Or do these different positions on spectatorship rather signal an unevenness of theoretical development – or, to put it less teleologically, reflect the different intellectual histories and epistemological groundings of film theory and television theory?

Any differences in the spectator-text relations proposed respectively by soap opera and by film melodrama must be contingent to some extent on more general disparities in address between television and cinema. Thus film spectatorship, it may be argued, involves the pleasures evoked by looking in a more pristine way than does watching television. Whereas in classic cinema the concentration and involvement proposed by structures of the look, identification and point-of-view tend to be paramount, television spectatorship is more likely to be characterised by distraction and diversion.<sup>12</sup> This would suggest that each medium constructs sexual difference through spectatorship in rather different ways: cinema through the look and spectacle, and television – perhaps less evidently – through a capacity to insert its flow, its characteristic modes of address, and the textual operations of different kinds of programmes into the rhythms and routines of domestic activities and sexual divisions of labour in the household at various times of day.

It would be a mistake, however, simply to equate current thinking on spectator-text relations in each medium. This is not only because theor-

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<sup>9</sup> Modleski, *Loving With a Vengeance*, op cit, p 88.

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<sup>10</sup> Charlotte Brunsdon, 'Crossroads: Notes on Soap Opera', *Screen*, vol 22 no 4 (1981), pp 32-37.

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<sup>11</sup> Cook, op cit, p 19.

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<sup>12</sup> John Ellis, *Visible Fictions*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982.

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<sup>13</sup> Brunson, op cit.  
p 32.

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<sup>14</sup> A similar model is also adopted by Dorothy Hobson in *Crossroads: the Drama of a Soap Opera*, London, Methuen, 1982.

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etical work on spectatorship as it is defined here is newer and perhaps not so developed for television as it has been for cinema, but also because conceptualisations of spectatorship in film theory and TV theory emerge from quite distinct perspectives. When feminist writers on soap opera and on film melodrama discuss spectatorship, therefore, they are usually talking about different things. This has partly to do with the different intellectual histories and methodological groundings of theoretical work on film and on television. Whereas most TV theory has until fairly recently existed under the sociological rubric of media studies, film theory has on the whole been based in the criticism-oriented tradition of literary studies. In consequence, while the one tends to privilege contexts over texts, the other usually privileges texts over contexts.

However, some recent critical work on soap opera, notably work produced within a cultural studies context, does attempt a *rapprochement* of text and context. Charlotte Brunson, writing about the British soap opera *Crossroads*, draws a distinction between subject positions proposed by texts and a 'social subject' who may or may not take up these positions.<sup>13</sup> In considering the interplay of 'social reader and social text', Brunson attempts to come to terms with problems posed by the universalism of the psychoanalytic model of the spectator/subject as against the descriptiveness and limited analytical scope of studies of specific instances and conjunctures. In taking up the instance of soap opera, then, one of Brunson's broader objectives is to resolve the dualism of text and context.

'Successful' spectatorship of a soap like *Crossroads*, it is argued, demands a certain cultural capital: familiarity with the plots and characters of a particular serial as well as with soap opera as a genre. It also demands wider cultural competence, especially in the codes of conduct of personal and family life. For Brunson, then, the spectator addressed by soap opera is constructed within culture rather than by representation. This, however, would indicate that such a spectator, a 'social subject', might – rather than being a subject in process of gender positioning – belong after all to a social audience already divided by gender.

The 'social subject' of this cultural model produces meaning by decoding messages or communications, an activity which is always socially situated.<sup>14</sup> Thus although such a model may move some way towards reconciling text and context, the balance of Brunson's argument remains weighted in favour of context: spectator-text relations are apparently regarded virtually as an effect of socio-cultural contexts. Is there a way in which spectator/subjects of film and television texts can be thought in a historically specific manner, or indeed a way for the social audience to be rescued from social/historical determinism?

Although none of the feminist criticism of soap opera and melodrama reviewed here has come up with any solution to these problems, it all attempts, in some degree and with greater or lesser success, to engage with them. Brunson's essay possibly comes closest to an answer, paradoxically because its very failure to resolve the dualism which ordains that spectators are constructed by texts while audiences have their place

in contexts begins to hint at a way around the problem. Although the hybrid 'social subject' may turn out to be more a social audience member than a spectator, this concept does suggest that a move into theories of discourse could prove to be productive.

Both spectators and social audience may accordingly be regarded as discursive constructs. Representations, contexts, audiences and spectators would then be seen as a series of interconnected social discourses, certain discourses possessing greater constitutive authority at specific moments than others. Such a model permits relative autonomy for the operations of texts, readings and contexts, and also allows for contradictions, oppositional readings and varying degrees of discursive authority. Since the state of a discursive formation is not constant, it can be apprehended only by means of inquiry into specific instances or conjunctures. In attempting to deal with the text-context split and to address the relationship between spectators and social audiences, therefore, theories of representation may have to come to terms with discursive formations of the social, cultural and textual.

#### IV

One of the impulses generating feminist critical and theoretical work on soap opera and the woman's picture is a desire to examine genres which are popular, and popular in particular with women. The assumption is usually that such popularity has to do mainly with the social audience: TV soaps attract large numbers of viewers, many of them women, and in its heyday the woman's picture also drew in a mass female audience. But when the nature of this appeal is sought in the texts themselves or in relations between spectators and texts, the argument becomes rather more complex. In what specific ways do soaps and melodramas address or construct female/feminine spectators?

To some extent, they offer the spectator a position of mastery: this is certainly true as regards the hermeneutic of the melodrama's classic narrative, though perhaps less obviously so in relation to the soap's infinite process of narrativity. At the same time, they also place the spectator in a masochistic position of either – in the case of the woman's picture – identifying with a female character's renunciation or, as in soap opera, forever anticipating an endlessly held-off resolution. Culturally speaking, this combination of mastery and masochism in the reading competence constructed by soaps and melodramas suggests an interplay of masculine and feminine subject positions. Culturally dominant codes inscribe the masculine, while the feminine bespeaks a 'return of the repressed' in the form of codes which may well transgress culturally dominant subject positions, though only at the expense of proposing a position of subjection for the spectator.

At the same time, it is sometimes argued on behalf of both soap opera and film melodrama that in a society whose representations of itself are governed by the masculine, these genres at least raise the possibility of



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<sup>15</sup> Cook, op cit. E Ann Kaplan takes a contrary position in 'Theories of Melodrama: a Feminist Perspective', *Women and Performance: a Journal of Feminist Theory* vol 1 no 1 (1983), pp 40-48.

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<sup>16</sup> Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance*, op cit, p 87.

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female desire and female point-of-view. Pam Cook advances such a view in relation to the woman's picture, for example.<sup>15</sup> But how is the oppositional potential of this to be assessed? Tania Modleski suggests that soap opera is 'in the vanguard not just of TV art but of all popular narrative art'.<sup>16</sup> But such a statement begs the question: under what circumstances can popular narrative art itself be regarded as transgressive? Because texts do not operate in isolation from contexts, any answer to these questions must take into account the ways in which popular narratives are read, the conditions under which they are produced and consumed, and the ends to which they are appropriated. As most feminist writing on soap opera and the woman's melodrama implies, there is ample space in the articulation of these various instances for contradiction and for struggles over meaning.

The popularity of television soap opera and film melodrama with women raises the question of how it is that sizeable audiences of women relate to these representations and the institutional practices of which they form part. It provokes, too, a consideration of the continuity between women's interpellation as spectators and their status as a social audience. In turn, the distinction between social audience and spectator/subject, and attempts to explore the relationship between the two, are part of a broader theoretical endeavour: to deal in tandem with texts and contexts. The distinction between social audience and spectator must also inform debates and practices around cultural production, in which questions of context and reception are always paramount. For anyone interested in feminist cultural politics, such considerations will necessarily inform any assessment of the place and the political usefulness of popular genres aimed at, and consumed by, mass audiences of women.

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"So we went back to where we were bred and born as children." *Jeannie.*

**MADE WITH...** A Family living in Shadwell with four generations of women still living. A group of eighteen women who met through a series of film shows that we put on at Four Corners.

16mm Colour 75 mins.

financed and produced by the  
BFI Production Board

## serious undertakings



"I have the impression (some feminists) are relying too much on an existentialist concept of woman, a concept that attaches a guilt complex to the maternal function. Either one has children, but that means one is not good for anything else, or one does not, and then it becomes possible to devote oneself to serious undertakings."

**A FILM ABOUT FILM, POLITICS,  
CULTURE AND PLEASURE**

HELEN GRACE

16mm COLOUR  
CRITICAL REVIEW  
28 mins

# 'CINEMA/ IDEOLOGY/ CRITICISM' REVISITED: THE PROGRESSIVE TEXT

BY BARBARA KLINGER

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<sup>1</sup> Reprinted in translation in *Screen* Spring 1971, vol 12 no 1, pp 27-36 and *Screen Reader* 1, London, SEFT, 1977, pp 2-11.

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<sup>2</sup> Among such pieces involving mainstream production are: Christine Gledhill, 'Klute: A Contemporary Film Noir and Feminist Criticism' and Sylvia Harvey, 'Woman's Place: The Absent Family of Film Noir' in E Ann Kaplan (ed), *Women in Film Noir*, London, BFI, 1978, pp 6-21 and 22-33; Claire Johnston, 'Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema', in Patricia Erens (ed), *Sexual Stratagems*, New York, Horizon Press 1979, pp 133-143; Claire Johnston (ed), *The Work of Dorothy Arzner: Towards a Feminist*

SINCE THE PUBLICATION of the Jean-Louis Comolli/Paul Narboni editorial, 'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism', in *Cahiers du Cinéma*<sup>1</sup> in 1969, close theoretical and critical attention has been devoted to the elaboration of the particular relation between cinematic text and ideology, as a central aspect of the overall post-1968 concern with the area of cultural production. The terms of this elaboration, advanced fundamentally through a Marxist/feminist perspective which employs, variably, a quartet of textual theories drawn from formalism, structuralism, semiotics and psychoanalysis, have been as diverse as the textual objects addressed, which range from classic Hollywood through to the work of the experimental avant-garde. Vital to and constant within this primarily textual focus of the cinema/ideology inquiry are the twin interrogatives of what constitutes dominant cinematic practices, and, then, what de-constitutes them. These concerns have, on one front, led to a full-scale critical expedition into the Hollywood cinema as a particularly compelling site for the analysis of dominant aesthetic/cultural production, and have resulted in the development of a refined set of analytical procedures designed to designate and differentiate the ideological contours of specific textual practices within the only apparently monolithic mainstream.

Though the pursuit of a 'counter-cinema' has defined encounters with all manner of texts, the subdivision I wish to reprise and reconsider here is that which has addressed differing textual 'politics' within Hollywood cinema. Part of this work on the signifying practices of dominant cinema has involved the critical identification of a series of 'rebel' texts within the Hollywood empire; these texts, while firmly entrenched within the system, display certain textual features which are critically deemed as combative to the conventions governing the 'typical' classic text. Ideological criticism, which has so entertained the variability of textual politics within mainstream production, has distinguished a category of films referred to as 'progressive' or 'subversive'.

While this classification has influenced and contributed to developments in both auteur and genre studies, my explanatory emphasis will primarily concern film genre. It is important to note, however, that ideological genre criticism is quite substantially inflected by questions of authorship; within each specific critical argument engaged with defining the progressive coordinates of certain generic periods, auteurist considerations are frequently instrumental to the architecture. Among film-groups which have been of interest to ideological criticism are: *film noir*, the woman's film, the forties and fifties melodrama, the seventies horror film, and the exploitation and 'B' film. This list is by no means exhaustive of the criticism which has spanned the notion of 'progressivity,' but simply suggestive of the expanse of work which has consistently taken up and elaborated the parameters of the progressive film.<sup>2</sup> What follows will be both a reconsideration and a re-evaluation of the theoretical genealogy and critical terms through which this substantial current in film studies has developed.

### 1. Neo-Marxist Aesthetic Theory

The initial theoretical formulation which underwrote the critical constitution of the 'progressive' text was instituted by Louis Althusser. Though his essays expressly on art – 'A Letter on Art in Reply to Andre Daspre' and 'Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract'<sup>3</sup> – are not voluminous meditations on a Marxist theory of the artistic text, they do furnish the edifice from which such a theory and its adjacent conceptualisation of a critical praxis were constructed, in greater detail, in film studies.

Briefly, the focus of discussion in these essays is an elaboration of art's specific relation to ideology. For Althusser, the most emphatic aspect of art to be addressed within this enquiry is its essential, definitive epistemology. Art, here, is neither 'knowledge in the strictest sense' nor unadulterated ideology; it provides rather a particularly valuable epistemological half-way house between the two. According to Althusser, 'What art makes us *see*, and therefore gives us in the forms of "*perceiving*" and "*feeling*"... is the ideology from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it alludes.'<sup>4</sup> Art as an especial perceptual agency performs, then, a quasi-epistemic function: it literally makes a spectacle of ideology, and in so doing, elucidates, even materially objectifies, the presence and activity of ideology.

Further, in this distinction of the epistemological contours of art, certain artists' works are singled out (Balzac, Cremonini) as they exhibit an exceptionally revelatory view of the ideology in which they 'bathe'. This view, in Althusser's words, 'presupposes a *retreat*, an *internal distancing*, from the very ideology from which their (work) emerged'. Similarly, these texts make us 'perceive... in some sense from the *inside*, by an *internal distance*, that ideology in which they are held'.<sup>5</sup>

This commentary implies a class of texts with a slightly superior epis-

*Cinema*, London, BFI, 1975; Thomas Elsaesser, 'Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama', *Monogram* no 4, pp 2-15; Robin Wood, 'Ideology, Genre, Auteur', *Film Comment*, January-February 1977, pp 46-51. Robin Wood in Andrew Britton et al (eds), *The American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film*, Toronto, Festival of Festivals, 1979; Pam Cook, 'Exploitation Films and Feminism', *Screen* Summer 1976, vol 17 no 2, pp 122-127.

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<sup>3</sup> Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trs Ben Brewster, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1971, pp 221-227, 228-242.

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, p 222.

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, p 241.

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temology; that is, it suggests the existence of a textual practice which amplifies the 'basic' epistemological dynamics of the aesthetic text, to the point where the text not only objectifies the ideological, but effects a more emphatic distance from it – a 'break' – which, in turn, forces the ideological into conspicuous view.

– Central to Althusser's discussion of an aesthetic epistemology is the definition of a corresponding, distinctly Marxist critical practice, whose function it is to compose a knowledge of art. This knowledge of art, like all knowledge for Althusser, 'presupposes a preliminary *rupture* with the language of *ideological spontaneity*', and constructs 'a body of scientific concepts to replace it'.<sup>6</sup> The mission of criticism here is not, as in some traditions, to act in complicity with the aesthetic facade of the text, so as to bolster its consumption, but rather, to realise and quantify the internal textual objectification of ideology, produced by art's peculiar epistemological character.

Summarily, this theorisation of the artistic text and consonant specification of a critical practice of reading promote a strong, explicitly textual focus to questions of the relation of art and ideology. The text is characterised as a site upon which the significant relations of representation and ideology are distilled, almost in bilateral configuration. The language of Althusser's aesthetic epistemology used to describe the text/ideology relation – rupture, break, internal distancing, deformation – foster this sense of the reflexive, formal geography of the text, which by critical extension, can be viewed as internally empowered to engineer an 'auto-critique' of the ideology in which it is held. The potential of this perspective on the artistic text is elaborated within film studies to produce a critical and aesthetic category of films, designated generally as 'progressive'.

## 2. Film Theory/Criticism: The Progressive Formulation

*Once we realise that it is the nature of the system to turn the cinema into an instrument of ideology, we can see that the film-maker's first task is to show up the cinema's so-called 'depiction of reality'. If he can do so there is a chance that we will be able to disrupt or possibly even sever the connection between the cinema and its ideological function. The vital distinction between films today is whether they do this or whether they do not.*<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

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<sup>7</sup> Jean-Louis Comolli and Paul Narboni, 'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism'. References in footnote 1.

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The mobilisation of Althusser's precepts into active critical service in film, via the Comolli/Narboni editorial, provided the aesthetic optics through which film texts were purposefully re-scrutinised – expressly in order to ascertain their 'textual politics'. The overall project of the Comolli/Narboni essay, to differentiate the text's specific relation to the ideology it produces in form and content, results in a seven-category classification of film-types, wherein films are appraised according to how they adhere to or depart from predominant expressions of ideology.

The categories most pertinent for discussion here, categories 'a' and 'e', feature films within the tradition of classical Hollywood cinema—that tradition recognised as both forming the basis for and exemplifying dominant representational concerns and practices. In this critical scheme, category 'a' (the one most populated) typifies a 'zero-degree' state of textual politics; these films act only as conduits for and perpetrators of existing ideological norms, both in content (for instance, as they salute the institutions and premises which define 'the American way'), and in form (accepting the conventional system of depiction in the cinema). An 'e' film, on the other hand, though appearing supportive of the ideology which conditions its existence, hampers the straightforward expression of it, through the production of a formally-impelled rupture with the veneer of its own premises. The cinematic framework of 'e' films, 'lets us see [the operative ideology], but also shows it up and denounces it', producing 'an internal criticism . . . which cracks the film apart . . . an internal tension . . . simply not there in an ideologically innocuous film'. Comolli/Narboni identify a textual practice, which while fully integrated within dominant cinema, 'ends up by partially dismantling the system from within'.<sup>8</sup> The 'e' category then fits the description of the more epistemologically ambitious text outlined by Althusser, the text whose structure produces ideological critique.

The importance of these particular classifications to the identification of a body of texts as progressive lies, first, simply in the critical provision for a differential typology of textual politics within dominant cinema, and then, crucially, in the essential systemic relationship through which that difference is established; 'e' films achieve their preferential 'politic' status through their reflexive, deconstructive relation to what is recognised as the standard classic text. This relational distinction, implicit in Comolli/Narboni, informs subsequent and more extensive elaborations of the specific textual parameters of the progressive text and genre.

This discrimination is clear in one of the bedrock propositions regulating the critical establishment of progressive textual practice: that the progressive must exhibit textual characteristics which are strategically reactive to commonplace 'classicism'. In general, the strong critical investment in designating and elucidating counter- or progressive cinema is financed through a staunch conception of classic textuality, against which progressive practice relies for its very definition.

### 3. Profile of the Progressive Text/Genre

*The 'classic text' (applicable to genre and non-genre films) describes a dominant mode of production, which masks its own operation . . . in terms of covering over ideological tension and contradiction . . . which (then) represents the Truth vis-a-vis the film's content and meaning, or in terms of giving the impression that it gives access to the real world.<sup>9</sup>*

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<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, *Screen* vol 12 no 1, p 33.

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<sup>9</sup> E Ann Kaplan in E Ann Kaplan (ed), *op cit*, p 2.

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The classic form subscribes to an ideology of representation – the achievement of the ‘impression of reality’ – and, in so doing, unproblematically circulates dominant cultural ideas. A distinguishing mark of the progressive film is its operational refusal of the overall ambition of the classic form toward concealment and transparency, the arch-attributes of realism. This formal dynamic embodies a challenge to the conventional means of representing reality in the cinema, in such a way as to expose those means as practice, as a product of ideology, and not as a manifest replication of reality. The progressive text is in this sense anti-realist, as it rattles the perfect illusionism transmitted by a major sector of classic cinema, resulting in a more aggressive, problematising relation with its ideological environment. Assessments of progressive texts and genres generally establish the features of departure from convention in this way, and subsequently endow those features with the edifying effects of ‘rupture’. This critical tendency continues, whether in letter or in spirit, the specifically textual focus to questions of the cinema/ideology relation suggested by Althusser’s notion of an aesthetic epistemology.

Though the critics engaged in distinguishing the progressive text are not at all homogeneous in methodology (all do not draw explicitly from Althusser, some arguments are more heavily inflected by auteurism than others, etc), the terms in which they identify the requisite characteristics of progressive films and genres are strikingly similar. The consistent conceptual basis for this constitution involves an insistence upon the film/genre’s reactive difference from what is ‘classic’ in classic Hollywood fare, as well as, especially in genre studies, the establishment of the generic period’s insurgent inventional qualities within the diachronous structures which govern its entire system. Difference from the environment of conventions within which these films exist, then, is a paramount feature of their progressive status, and the rationale by which they are accorded a radical valence. The diverse critical positions which address *film noir*, the woman’s film, the forties and fifties ‘sophisticated family melodrama’, the seventies horror film, and the exploitation and ‘B’ films are united in particular by an emphasis on the identity of these film groups as alternative or ‘counter’-cinemas within the aegis of dominant cinematic practice. Each of these generic propositions is not forged exclusively on the basis of genre considerations alone, however, but is usually substantially articulated through specific auteurs and films; evidence the preference of Sirk and Minnelli melodramas over those of Curtiz or Mankiewicz, Wes Craven over David Cronenberg, and an emphasis on Dorothy Arzner’s woman’s films or Stephanie Rothman’s exploitation films. But even given the myriad areas of emphasis within ideological-generic criticism, the ideological ‘aesthetics’ employed in each argument are implicitly dictated through the presense or non-presense of certain textual attributes necessary to the architecture of the progressive category. The collection of shared features consolidates a meta-generic identity for progressive texts, based on their conceived uniform exceptionalness to the Hollywood rule. What follows is a selective, synthetic exposition of the characteristics



which describe the progressive class of films. These traits do not by any means exhaust each individual critical argument, but display in schematic form the consistent means through which the 'progressive' is critically constructed.

**A 'Pessimistic' World View:** Instead of the optimism which characterises the typical celebratory or complacent view of the American way of life in the classic text (such as *The Bells of St. Mary's*), the overall atmosphere of these films is bleak, cynical, apocalyptic and/or highly ironic (*Kiss Me Deadly*, *It's Alive*, *All That Heaven Allows*) in such a way as to disturb or disable an unproblematic transmission of affirmative ideology. So, as Sylvia Harvey writes of *film noir*, it 'captures and magnifies the rumbles that shift the hidden foundations of a society and...begins the displacement of its characteristic and dominant system of values and beliefs'<sup>10</sup>; as Robin Wood writes of seventies horror, giving 'the sense of civilisation condemning itself...a negativity...not recuperable into the dominant ideology, but constituting the recognition of that ideology's disintegration, its untenability'<sup>11</sup>; and as Thomas Elsaesser comments on the way in which fifties melodramas, portray the 'demise of the affirmative culture'<sup>12</sup>.

**Themes:** Associated with this world view, the themes of the progressive film dramatise the demolition of values positively propounded in dominant cinema's characterisation of the role and nature of social institutions—such things as the inviolability and/or ultimate benevolence of the law, and the family as an institution of social and sexual 'salvation' for the individual members of a couple, especially women. (A contemporary example of the latter theme can be found in *An Officer and*

The exploitation film as 'counter'-cinema: Stephanie Rothman's *Student Nurses*.

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<sup>10</sup> Sylvia Harvey in *ibid*, p 22.

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<sup>11</sup> Robin Wood in Andrew Britton et al (eds), *op cit*, p 22.

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, *op cit*, p 15.





Seventies horror  
versus the law: *Texas  
Chainsaw Massacre*.

a *Gentleman*.) The law and the family are two institutions which come consistently under the remonstrative gun in these films, mainly through an hysterical exaggeration of an attack on their repressive and deforming principles (such as in *Shadow of a Doubt*, *Mildred Pierce*, *Home from the Hill*, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Jackson County Jail*). In film noir, the law is generally depicted as corrupt and/or ineffectual, and the family, as Harvey indicates, is absent, depicted in either a 'too-sunny' glow of banality or as sterile and monstrous. In the melodrama, the psychic destructiveness of the social institutions, often centering on the heterosexual couple, results in a rampageous representation of ambition and a romantic love disquieted through expressions of nymphomania, impotence, suicidal tendencies, obsessions with paternity and the like. (*Written on the Wind* is an especially rich example of these psychodynamics.) There is, in short, no longer any restful identity to be found in the family in these films; the centre of hope in most narratives, the romantic couple, is shown as either cloyingly insipid or deranged, two spectral expressions of the same impulse to de-naturalise and explode the myth of the happy, unproblematic founding unit of the family.

**Narrative Form:** It is in the narrative and stylistic elements of progressive films that their dual critique of classic form/classic ideology is really substantially generated. There are several structural components which are essential to this critique.

First, the overall narrative structure is refined toward an exposure, rather than as in the classic text a suppression, of ideological contradictions and tensions. The progressive structure can work, for instance, to

conflate oppositions within the dramatic conflict, which usually act to separate good (that which upholds the existing order) from evil (that which threatens it) absolutely. So, structural correspondences may be drawn between hero and villain, and the respective systems they represent. This characteristic is very important to Robin Wood's distinction between Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* and Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt*<sup>13</sup>, and also in his examination of seventies horror. The concept of structurally-impelled contradiction figures prominently in Elsaesser's discussion of cinematic counterpoint in melodrama, and in Gledhill's analysis of point-of-view structures in *film noir*. The parallelisms wrought by the structural complexity of these films create ambiguity which prevents easy identification and segregation of systems of 'good' and 'evil'.

Most importantly, the narrative form of the ideologically complex film departs from the perceived demands of the classical Hollywood form. The principles of the latter construction require a general effect of legibility and transparency, qualities obtained through a well-defined chain of cause-and-effect which ends in satisfying closure. Conventional rules of construction promote the invisibility of the mechanisms at work and the expulsion of any feature which would distract from the hegemony of the narrative line. The progressive film/genre, it is critically claimed, departs from the letter of the classical system by either paring it down to its barest essentials (as does the exploitation film), so that cause-and-effect exist, but merely in the most minimal acknowledgement of that system of construction, more than as any kind of systematic illumination of the narrative flow; or by exaggerating its principles (as

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<sup>13</sup> Robin Wood, 'Ideology, Genre, Auteur', op cit, pp 46-51.

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Fifties melodrama versus the family: *All That Heaven Allows*.



<sup>14</sup> Sylvia Harvey in E Ann Kaplan (ed), op cit, p 33.

<sup>15</sup> Robin Wood, in Andrew Britton et al (eds), op cit.

The foregrounding of visual style in *film noir*: *Double Indemnity*.

the structure of reversal in melodrama or the circuitous jungle of cause-and-effect in *film noir*), so that the logic of the system is overdetermined in such a way as to stretch its credibility and legibility. Through such tactics, these genres relexively articulate, and thus depart from, the rules of the system.

The issue of closure here is also crucial. The progressive film must escape the compromising forces inherent in the conventional procedure of closure. Whereas closure usually signals the ultimate containment of matters brought out in the narrative – the network of cause-and-effect is resolved, and the narrative returned to a final state of equilibrium – progressive films end in such a way as to ‘refuse’ closure. Certain critics maintain that these endings cannot contain the excess of meaning produced in the course of the film, cannot solve all the conflicts. Of *film noir* narratives, Harvey writes, ‘Narrative resolutions cannot recuperate their subversive significance.’<sup>14</sup> Wood similarly posits that, in contradistinction to ‘works of conscious social criticism’, the seventies’ horror film finale remains ultimately unredemptive.<sup>15</sup> The amount of violence and destructiveness centred upon the social institutions is not adequately resolved through the conventional device of closure. The circumvention of this process is fostered through the use of certain textual strategies: in the melodrama with the happy end, (especially when that most stalwart of Hollywood conventions is used by Douglas Sirk), the veneer of optimism is not only unconvincing, but countered by a system of meaning produced stylistically, which imbues the conclusion with unmistakable irony (as in *Written on the Wind*, or *Magnificent Obses-*



sion).<sup>16</sup> A combination of 'excessive' narrative problems encountered during the film, and the manner in which elements of the *mise-en-scène* undercut the affirmative ending, conspire to disturb the harmonising tendencies of closure. The strong sense of irony or desolation which frequently characterise these generic endings question the achievement of 'containing' closure and impart a rather hollow victory to this convention. The terms 'excess' and 'irony' are central to the issue of closure, as they wrench the intentions of conventional form to resolve contradictions unilaterally.

**Visual Style:** Visually, these films are basically characterised by stylistic self-consciousness and formal excess, which are seen in varying degrees of specificity as supporting or implementing a vital part of the subversive commentary in these films. This is in contrast to films which do not actively use their visual register to produce meaning – what Elsaesser calls 'liberal films of sophistication', such as those of Fred Zinneman, which 'do nothing in terms of visual elaboration to compensate for their verbal explicitness'.<sup>17</sup> In the progressive film, there is a foregrounding of visual style, which is manifested so forcefully as to contend with the dominance of the narrative line: in the exploitation and 'B' film, the visual register calls attention to itself through its sheer 'bargain basement' look; in *film noir* and horror, it is the use of expressionistic chiaroscuro and camera angles; and in melodrama, a similar 'baroque' foregrounding of the formal aspects of *mise-en-scène* and camera – all of which are seen as intensifying the text's internal structure of distancing.

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, *op cit*, p 6.

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<sup>17</sup> *ibid*, p 8.

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Excessive sexual stereotyping: Robert Mitchum's den in *Home from the Hill*.



**Character:** Rather than the 'three-dimensional' characters which populate films of 'good taste', the excessive sexual stereotyping of genre films is critically preferred, and, again, endowed with a revelatory salience: the stereotype is considered to foreground, rather than camouflage, the representational basis through which codes of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' are constructed in the cinema (see Robert Mitchum's den in *Home from the Hill*). Especially evident in the dynamics of gender representation is an intense focus on both the threat and enigma of female sexuality, in all of its psychoanalytic complexity (*Psycho*, *Written on the Wind*, *Gun Crazy*, *Caged Heat*).

#### 4. The Valuation of 'Anti-Classical' Difference

The identification of the progressive genre film depends heavily on critical leverage imparted to the intrinsic intentional characteristics described above, which serve to distinguish these films from the dominant classic cinema, and, often, from within their own generic categories as well. So *film noir* is 'recognizably different from other films', it 'stands out as a phase in the development of the gangster/thriller [because of] . . . certain highly foregrounded inflections of plot, character, and visual style which dominated at the expense of narrative coherence and the comprehensible solution of the crime, the usual goal of the thriller', and foregoes 'conventions of the dominant methods of filmmaking and storytelling'.<sup>18</sup> The major axis upon which the progressive argument revolves is this valuation of intentional signifiers, wherein 'difference' is conferred with deconstructive capabilities and a subversive effectivity.

In addition, the assessment of 'textual politics' based on systemic/textual attributes is not consistently considered as the product solely of critical computations derived from a certain reading position, but tends to introject the progressive features as intrinsic, effectual properties of the texts themselves; hence, texts can be labelled 'reactionary' or 'progressive' according to their internal subscription to or rejection of the classic paradigm and its imputed ideology. The ideological effects of a text come to be identified and ratified through the espoused critical reading.

That the cinema/ideology inquiry has become strongly situated within the province of textual reading is indicated especially in the logic and tenets of the progressive-text argument, wherein specific textual features embody that relation. This emphasis is true even in those genre studies which do attend to the external social/ideological environments which house the production of a given cycle of films. In the descriptions of the historical conditions circumscribing *film noir* or melodrama, the brunt of the relational analysis tends to spotlight the activity of the textual features as they respond to these conditions. This can assume a one-to-one correlation between social formation and representation, where, for

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<sup>18</sup> E Ann Kaplan, Christine Gledhill and Sylvia Harvey, respectively, in E Ann Kaplan (ed), *op cit*, pp 2, 13-14, 22.

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instance, the economic and psychic pre-occupations of post-War or corporate capitalist America are seen as both crystallised in and 'disturbed' by the *mise-en-scène*, respectively, of *film noir* and melodrama.

While the critical readings of Hollywood films developed from Marxist and feminist film theory have produced invaluable critical perspectives and tools with which to differentiate textual articulations of ideology (an absolutely necessary advance, historically, to ward off competing and reductive theories of Hollywood cinema forwarded by 'monolith-monsters' who asserted the unitary ideology of all Hollywood films), there is a strong impulse to overestimate the effectivity of textual signifiers in determining the text/ideology relation. The central issue here, then, is not a dispute with criticism tuned toward the definition of textual variation as significant to producing a cultural symptomatology, but simply with the prescription of a political value to those differences within a system of representation, so based on a univocal, textual-centric consideration of the cinema/ideology relation. In the transit from Althusser's explication of an aesthetic epistemology to the parallel formulation in film studies, there is a marked tendency toward a sort of 'textual isolationism', an intrinsic formalisation of the inquiry, cinema/ideology. In progressive text and genre criticism, this results in an overvaluation and overestimation of inventive, 'reactive', textual elements. The divisible aspects of this position within ideological criticism – consideration of the phenomenon of textual difference, and the subsequent assignment of autonomous political valence – bear further and alternative commentary.

## 5. Contextual Theories of Variation

The designation of texts and genres as 'progressive', which is dependent on a radical valorisation of inventional qualities, provokes at least two theoretical problems, which arise directly from other systematic theories as they account for the phenomenon of difference. Such a valuation suggests that a disturbance in the system can be achieved sheerly through the intervention of invention – this without sufficient deliberation of how the elements of difference are figured within the overall dynamics of the system of representational history or the system of narrative of which they are a part, and in which they function. Indeed, classical narrative within such readings is often little more than a backdrop against which the inventions and departures of *film noir* move and have effect. The excesses which mark these genre films are theorised as they distinguish their systematic difference, not as they may characterise the very mainstays of their mother-systems. The overvaluation of invention in these arguments underplays any sense of systemic context for these works, then, which might qualify the progressive assertion. Specifically, when examining the co-ordinates of the progressive/subversive genre, it seems quite necessary to consider the attributes of the diachronic

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<sup>19</sup> Maria Corti, *An Introduction to Literary Semiotics*, trs Margherita Mandelbaum, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1978, p 16.

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<sup>20</sup> A more extensive discussion of this point can be found in Tony Bennett, *Formalism and Marxism*, London, Methuen, 1979.

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<sup>21</sup> Roman Jakobson, 'The Dominant' in L Matejka and K Pomorska (eds), *Readings in Russian Poetics*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1971, pp 76-77.

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<sup>22</sup> Maria Corti, *op cit*, p134.

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systems they, as micro-systems, inhabit. This emphasis poses the question of generic/systemic evolution and re-investigation of genre's relation to classical narrative.

In defining the place of genre within its systemic history, theories emanating from Formalist/semiotic accounts of literary evolution are particularly germane. Semiotician Maria Corti, aided and abetted by Formalist theories of literary evolution, addresses herself specifically to the question of innovation within the generic system. She writes,

*the process of transformation inside a literary genre... has regulative power. In every hypersign of strong individuality the program of the literary genre matures and is modified as it becomes a constitutive law of the work itself... From the moment in which such a process takes place, the transformation which was an individual event, becomes another link in the chain that is the path of the literary genre.*<sup>19</sup>

This view of the literary system parallels the normative evaluation of violation within literary evolution put forward by Formalists such as Jurij Tynjanov and Roman Jakobson. The terms 'deviation', 'deformation', 'defamiliarisation', which are fuelled with subversive implications in some ideological criticism, are used in Formalism to define the normative dynamics of literary evolution;<sup>20</sup> innovations in the system do not entail sudden and complete renovations, but are mutations which genetically engineer the modifications necessary to the maintenance and persistence of the system. The chiaroscuro lighting schemes in *films noirs*, for instance, which are critically observed as cueing their disequilibrium and subversive disturbances to the norm, have ancestral ties to German Expressionist lighting tactics and also to those codes which characteristically signified 'criminal environments' in thirties crime films. (In other words, no film genre is an island.) The individual work intrinsically reflects and modifies the diachronous characteristics of the system. As Jakobson remarked, 'This simultaneous presentation of tradition and breaking away from tradition... form the essence of every new work of art.'<sup>21</sup> Here, the notion of difference, even a staunchly innovative one, seems firmly entrenched within the vicissitudes of the system.

The relation of genre to the narrative system results in a parallel minimisation of the autonomy of difference. The explicit relation of genre to the literary system, theorised by Corti, defines genre as a type of literary process, reproducing 'like a microcosm those functional variations that generate the very movement of literature'.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, rather than privileging overtly inventive genres as 'escapees' from the regulations of the classical narrative system, one can argue that they instead be regarded as instances of the system's requisite operation. The 'rupture thesis', as it has been developed in the branch of ideological criticism considered here, relies on a very restricted formulation of classical narrative which enables a deviation from the identified principles to be readily gauged as challenging the entire foundation of the system.

In theories of classical Hollywood narrativity, Stephen Heath's

work<sup>23</sup>, among others, has stressed a less petrified formula for the classic text via a consideration of its principles of structuration and process. Similarly, this Heathian perspective has informed Stephen Neale's redefinition of genre. In Neale's view, genre is an instance of the classical Hollywood system par excellence: genres are 'modes of this narrative system, regulated orders of its potentiality'.<sup>24</sup> This theory of classical narrative relieves the rigidity of definition drawn by the term 'classic text' and offers instead the notion of a classical textual system, which is produced from a volatile combination of disequilibrium (excess, difference) and equilibrium (containment, repetition). Neale, like Corti, recognises disequilibrium/difference not as a partisan component of the subversive text, but as an essential functioning element of the overall system. Genres play an essential role in demonstrating and supporting the principles of this classic textual system, which

*allow for (regulated) forms of excess, and (regulated) forms of display of its process . . . part of the very function of genres is precisely to display a variety of possibilities of the semiotic processes of mainstream narrative cinema while containing them simultaneously as genre. Hence, the musical with its systematic freedom of space – its shifting balance of narrative and spectacle – or the film noir, with its display of the possibilities of chiaroscuro lighting, frequently unmotivated, diegetically impossible.*<sup>25</sup>

Genre then is an exigent permutation of this system which thrives on a play of variation and regulation. Genres provide what Neale calls 'regularized variety' and so are directly related to the textual economy of the system, in that they 'systematize its regime of difference and repetition', providing an 'economy of variation, rather than rupture . . .'.<sup>26</sup>

What these contextual perspectives provide is a less inflammatory reading of the impact of moments of textual difference, by projecting the dynamics of difference/innovation as system-descriptive, rather than system-subversive. The question of the nature and processes of both systemic-historic evolution and classical narrativity do not efface the cogent results of textually-oriented ideological analyses, but rather qualify contentions about the ideological effectivity of texts which are presumed 'rupturous'. In the case of progressive-text criticism, 'textual isolationism' invites an assessment of textual politics which is based on a rather rigid sense of both what 'makes' and 'breaks' the system. Critical assumptions which so measure the subversiveness of a film, based on its anti-classical formal attributes, underestimate the means through which supervising systems negotiate a normative function for even the most excessive, foregrounded, deformative textual tendencies.

## 6. Conclusion

In any case, the cinema/ideology problematic cannot rely solely upon readings and interpretations distilled from textual introspection. The whole bilateral syntax of the aesthetic epistemology encourages at least two constricting perspectives: a sense of the monologic nature of both

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<sup>23</sup> Cf Stephen Heath, 'Film and System', *Screen* Spring 1975, vol 16 no 1, pp 7-77 and Summer 1975, vol 16 no 2, pp 91-113.

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<sup>24</sup> Stephen Neale, *Genre*, London BFI, 1980, p 20.

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<sup>25</sup> *ibid*, p 31.

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<sup>26</sup> *ibid*.



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<sup>27</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, London, Verso, 1978, pp 75, 98.

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'ideology' and discourse, and a conceptual coalescence of aesthetic with ideological effect. On the former count, the proliferation of diverse and co-existing representations at any given historical conjuncture would suggest the pliability, rather than rigidity, of ideology – that is, the management of variety in the interests of its own continuity. Sheer textual pageantry promotes a hegemonic concept of the operational dynamics of ideology, wherein representational differences service, rather than subvert, ideology, by complexly orchestrating the consent of various socio-cultural groups within the representational/ideological community. On the latter count, the equation of aesthetic and ideological effect short-circuits a consideration of diachronic and synchronic factors which contribute to the definition of the text's relation to the social formation. Terry Eagleton, in his critique of this streamlining drift of Marxist aesthetic theory, writes:

*What is in question is not the relation between the text and some separable signified, but the relation between textual signification . . . and those more pervasive significations we name ideology. . . . The text is neither an epiphenomenon of ideology nor a wholly autonomous element. . . . The 'truth' of the text is not an essence but a practice – the practice of its relation to ideology and in terms of that to history.*<sup>27</sup>

The relation of text to context is decisively important to a theoretical and critical construction of the cinema/ideology relation. Within the semiotic jungle produced by the representational manifestations of the 'culture industry', there are numerous and palpable intertextual interventions between a given text and its socio-ideological environ. The context which monitors any film's entry into the world is titanic; among its representational members are industrial practices of exhibition and distribution, including promotional advertising, and popular or academic criticism. The text, 'in practice', is an intersection at which multiple and 'extra-textual' practices of signification circulate. While extrinsic representational factors are apt to be expunged from serious textual analysis as vulgar or as environmental noise which interferes with the veracity of the text itself, they play a significant role in directing/constructing the reading and consumption of textual objects; and in so doing, they embody a network of ideologically-determined practices as worthy of attention as specific textual attributes. Extrinsic social and representational forms which skirt the text comprise a cluster of textual sites of signification informative to a comprehension of the more global mechanisms through which texts are negotiated within social formations.

The 'law' of the text, then, has to be tampered with to exact a less streamlined, and more socially-responsive theory of the cinema/ideology relation. The fact that the text is one micro-drama in an epic of institutional practices does defuse the question of the revolutionary potential of art; but this realisation has the advantage of facilitating a critical engagement with the diversity of social formations as they superintend and create experiences with signification, thus more adequately attending to the constituent features of the multi-faceted phenomenon of ideological maintenance.

# POPULISM, RELATIVISM AND LEFT STRATEGY

A CONTRIBUTION TO THE DEBATE ON  
COMMERCIAL BROADCASTING  
BY CARL GARDNER

We should welcome Ian Connell's response<sup>1</sup> to Nicholas Garnham's article 'Public Service versus the Market'<sup>2</sup>. Both the original article and the reply are very positive contributions to an important theme – the strategic political questions of British broadcasting and its imminent transformation. I hope this contribution will extend that urgent debate, for I want to take issue with both my precursors, who have spelt out in detail two of the dominant parameters of strategic thinking on the media today.

First, I'd like to concur with Connell's central critique of Garnham's position – its reliance on a grossly over-determining economic analysis, which presents a virtually unstoppable commercial monolith bearing down on British media culture in the coming decade – an analysis in which, following Marcuse *et al*, the commodification of culture inevitably means deterioration, homogenisation and the growth of 'ideology'. Privileging the moment of production and the commercial intentions of the producers, ignoring any politics of representation, this leads to the notion of the total hegemonic *effectivity* of commercial products and a massive cultural pessimism, only enlivened by the magical invocation of 'public service broadcasting' to which progressive ideas and personnel can

escape. Leaving aside the question of whether the BBC's products are commodities or not, one only has to point out that a similar position on the feature film industry, which has been commercially-oriented for most of this century, would have to conclude that nothing progressive could ever emerge, except from within the protected enclaves of such bodies as the BFI Production Board and the National Film Board of Canada. Over the last decade the work of *Screen* to construct a political understanding of the complexity and range of Hollywood 'product' has been particularly directed at the commodity = crap equation. In Garnham's analysis there is no room for struggles *around* meaning, or for more productive and subversive spectatorial relations; for him the immanent meaning of films or programmes, pre-determined by their class origins or the makers' intentions, pass uninterrupted and automatically into the viewers' heads.

Ian Connell is also right to point out the cluster of problems in Garnham's position which stem from the dominant equation of 'commercialisation' with US influence, and particularly the importation of US TV programmes. This invokes the powerful streak of 'anti-Americanism' in British cultural politics, including the national presumption that 'British is Best', or 'the least worst' anyway, in all areas of TV production. Even viewed empirically, it's questionable whether British exports to the USA – a steady stream of mediocre, nostalgised, deguttled, de-politicised versions of 'classic' or not-so-classic novels (*Great Expectations*, *Woman in White*, *Fame Is the Spur* etc.) or celebrations of

<sup>1</sup> Ian Connell, 'Commercial Broadcasting and the British Left', *Screen* November-December 1983, vol 24 no 6, pp 70-80

<sup>2</sup> Nicholas Garnham, 'Public Service versus the Market', *Screen* January-February 1983, vol 24 no 1, pp 6-27.



ruling-class heroes like *Churchill: The Wilderness Years*, *Edward and Mrs Simpson* or *Nancy Astor*<sup>3</sup> – are any ‘better’ than the US series, dealing with issues of today in an intelligent, if liberal,

way (*Lou Grant*, *Soap*, *Hill Street Blues*) which have made their way to Britain. These latter series, as befits their supposedly second-class status, are significantly treated appallingly by the schedulers of ITV.

Here the prospects for a debate on aesthetics and political evaluation seem limitless. From a radical perspective, which is ‘better’? A well-crafted, lavish and subtly naturalistic

<sup>3</sup> For a fuller discussion of these tendencies, see Carl Gardner and John Wyver, ‘The Single Play – An Afterward’, *Screen* July–October 1983, vol 24 nos 4–5, pp 125–129.



representation of a well-loved eccentric ruling-class, which skilfully organises consent, closes down other versions of history, and works successfully to homogenise and hegemonise the audience (say *Brideshead Revisited*)? Or a crudely-drawn, parodic, almost ritualised representation of the work and personal lives of the modern US bourgeoisie, which positively bristles with possibilities of

'misreading' (say *Dallas*)? In terms of a postulated capitalist 'effectivity', which promises a more convincing celebration of our social order?

For years the far left, beyond the Communist Party, has (correctly in my view) opposed import controls, not on the liberal capitalist grounds that they don't work, but because they increase illusions in 'national', isolationist solutions to the

48 global crisis and weaken the possibilities of internationalism, by (temporarily) off-loading unemployment onto workers elsewhere. They also tend to encourage corporatist alliances between workers and employers around (imagined) common interests and foster racism ('Keep out the wogs and their products'). Yet curiously (and symptomatically) the one area in which this opposition has not been consistently applied is television, where the far left has gone along with the 14% foreign quota system without demur, because it's mainly aimed at the USA. Do cultural products have a special status which exempts them from principled strategies? I think we should be told.

However, in his keenness to denounce this cultural protectionism, Connell fails to make a crucial distinction between the position applying to developed, capitalist countries and those of the Third World. Let us always remember that Britain, despite its economic decline, is still a powerful imperialist nation, in the cultural sphere as well as others – British TV is a net *exporter* of material. Our positions do not proceed from liberal, *laissez-faire* economics, but from an assessment of political dynamics. The self-defence of fledgling and often fragile national identities and cultures against the incursions of multinational capital and influence, the assertion of national liberation, still has a progressive if limited role to play in the Third World. There it can often catalyse class struggle – in the advanced metropolitan countries it can only suppress or stifle it. That's why I don't concur with Connell's somewhat naive encouragement of 'universal culture'. The struggle against 'cultural imperialism' (as embodied in the UNESCO 'New World Information Order' proposals, for example) should continue to command our support.

Connell is right, however, to draw attention to the hole Garnham backs himself into through his equation of 'public service broadcasting' as an ideal and 'public sector broadcasting' as presently constituted. Posed in that way it becomes inevitable that one defends the BBC, with reservations, regardless of the fact that the left has criticised it for years for its class and gender bias, its paternalism, its non-accountability and its unresponsiveness to popular feelings, needs and interests. It is a conundrum not confined to broadcasting – across the board, from the National Health Service to

the Arts Council to the BBC, public sector institutions are on the defensive, losing the battle of self-legitimation in the face of the onslaught of 'privatisation'. But defending those institutions effectively cannot be divorced from advancing a thorough critique and an aggressive alternative programme for the transformation of the social relations of production, control and consumption associated with them. It becomes increasingly difficult to mobilise support and enthusiasm for such flawed bodies, when they are experienced so negatively in daily life. Any campaign has to convince potential supporters that the BBC or the Independent Broadcasting Authority could be controlled and run in a radically different way. It's for this reason that I find most left policies for changing the media so inadequate, from the Labour Party to the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom – all of them are fixated on adding more representative personnel or setting up more democratic forms of control. None have come to grips with the influence of television's forms and conventions (genres, address, scheduling, etc) nor of its relations of production, hierarchy and division of labour, structure of working practices.<sup>4</sup>

Connell has little to say on these questions – he remains unashamedly locked on the horns of the 'public service'/commercial TV dichotomy, and iconoclastically opts for the latter, as the most 'realistic' site for the inclusion (incorporation?) of popular sentiments and needs, which he seems to think is the most we can even hope for in present circumstances. The slogan 'Politics is the art of the possible' may have an attractive, practical ring in this autumn of the Kinnock/Hobsbawm alliance, but it still remains deeply conservative.

This profoundly conservative 'realism' is stamped throughout Connell's article like a motto in Blackpool rock. On several occasions he counterposes 'the development of possibilities within things as they are' to left-wing carping or utopianism. I would argue that it is precisely the linking of far-reaching proposals for transformation to existing social conflicts which differentiates a materialist, and dare I say it, revolutionary, practice from piecemeal reforms on the one hand (in which increasingly few people have faith in this rapidly polarising society) and empty, abstract utopianism on the

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<sup>4</sup> This point will be pursued in *Screen* March-April 1984, vol 25 no 2.

other. And on Connell's model, one could ask 'development' towards what? What are these 'possibilities' he talks of? Where are they leading?

Connell offers precious little evidence for his optimism in regard to the progressive 'possibilities' of commercial TV and the few examples he adduces are distinctly problematic. He mentions in passing the encouragement of a critical documentary tradition as part of the commercial companies' positive contribution to the TV ecology. This may be true, but it's a bad example on which to build any projections for the future. Under commercial pressure this programming strand is decidedly on the decline in ITV. About a year ago, Paul Fox, Director of Yorkshire TV (which brought us celebrated documentaries like *Rampton* and *Johnny Come Home*) publicly stated that the single, one-hour documentary 'has had its day'. And in September 1983, John Birt, programme director of London Weekend Television was reported to be arguing for the 'pruning of less popular areas of programming', including documentaries, in a policy discussion-paper for the 'Big 5' network companies.<sup>5</sup> No one expects the critical, investigative documentary (or the single play) to have any place in the new TV systems opening up via cable and satellite. But the difficulty with the debate so far is that we haven't yet seen an untrammelled commercial TV set-up in Britain—even the ITV companies have had to work under the constraints of their 'public service' role, the Broadcasting Act, IBA rules etc., which guaranteed certain strands of programming, almost against the companies' direct interests and wishes. Once those constraints are lessened, or in the case of the new media, never imposed in the first place, we are in a new ball game. Any attempt to extrapolate from commercial TV in the past to commercial TV in the future is an exercise in self-deception. Is Ian Connell prepared to argue that strands like the single play or the critical documentary will simply be replaced by new types of programming which will be equally varied or valuable?

A second claim Connell makes for commercial television to date is quite astounding: 'Since the mid-1950s the commercial companies have been the base for a series of initiatives which have

*dispersed the control of production*, by for instance, extending the range of publics to which broadcasters must respond' (my emphasis). He then goes on to argue, quite correctly, that commercial companies must be responsive to the market and thus more sensitive to popular modes of address, themes, issues, rituals etc. But to represent this commercial opportunism as tantamount to a dispersal or shift in 'control of production' is to spell out a whole new version of 'consumer power', Naderism gone mad. If it means anything at all, it can only be a reiteration of the myth that ultimately the consumer rules, that the market is a (the?) dominant site of power or control. Looked at through any other lens, there is no evidence whatsoever of a dispersal in the control of production, unless it's merely a geographical observation, the setting up of regional TV companies (owned nevertheless by the few large leisure conglomerates) with a greater readiness to leaven full-time staff with freelances, 'outside' directors and producers. On the contrary the ITV moguls, aided and abetted by a steadily compliant IBA and an elitist and restrictive craft union (the ACTT) have maintained control of production as rigidly and as narrowly as ever: notions of accountability, access, popular involvement, democracy, self-representation of minorities etc, all possible versions of a real dispersal of control, have never even got on the agenda for discussion.

Connell's third specific argument is more complex and concerns the potentially subversive effects of simply watching TV (commercial or otherwise), as opposed to critical readings, oppositional practices, deconstruction and all the other 'marginal' things the left gets up to. Following the research of Macquail *et al* (admittedly with strong reservations), Connell posits the possibility that TV-watching is part of a process of working-class 'disengagement' from certain kinds of (predominantly) work-related or classroom-related obligations or duties—in fact the act of TV-watching may undermine social norms, may even be a cause of the breakdown of meaningful, authoritative, dutiful social order. More specifically, televisual representations may create disenchantment with the parliamentary system and its rituals (not an effect which the Labour Party or even the Communist Party would want to encourage, surely?). It's an interesting argument, but one which would seem to be excessively optimistic, though one can see

<sup>5</sup> See the *Guardian*, September 9, 1983.

50 how Connell cleverly adduces it as one more strand in his 'realistic' justification of the status quo. After all if TV-watching itself is part of the process of social and political subversion, then we should be in favour of more of it, regardless of the nature of the representations flashing up on the screen.

Two counter-arguments might temper such hopes—first, this process of 'disengagement' is likely to go along with other effects, including disenchantment with trade unionism, de-politicisation, the erosion of work-based cohesion and identity, atomisation and withdrawal from public, social practice into fragmented domestic contexts. Typically Connell almost sees the process he has described as an end in itself—what do these 'disengaged' viewers, freed from certain obligations and duties by the TV-set, go on to do? How is it likely to change their social practice? What are the mechanisms for the transference of this subversion of authority at the level of representation into public and political life?

Secondly, the argument is perhaps very male-specific: interestingly, Connell talks of disengagement from duties and obligations at work and school. Given the close association of television with domestic contexts, it is worthwhile asking whether this process can equally apply to women, surrounded as they are in the viewing-situation with the very duties and obligations (including servicing the disengaged male viewer) from which they are supposedly invited to escape via TV. And one has only to think of TV commercials, with their insistent, obligating address to female viewers to be 'good wives/mothers/girlfriends' through consumption of a wide range of products. How can such representations conceivably be regarded as subversive of duty or obligation? Don't they instead interpellate the woman viewer, at least, as a highly 'engaged' subject?

This leads us to the nitty-gritty of Connell's article, which I'll attempt to reconstruct using composite quotations. It's first and foremost an attack on left critiques of mass media representation as ideology, which 'most certainly cannot be taken too seriously as a contribution to an understanding of *popular* patterns of viewing'. As well as being irrelevant and unrepresentative, such work is condemned for being part of 'that apparently ineluctable drive to engage in... evaluative activity'. Instead we are advised to

learn from the cultural entrepreneurs and 'suspend judgement... what matters are popular tastes... critical writers really interested in change ought to be more concerned to identify why certain types of programme are preferred and what *particular* and specific structures of feeling and thought are thereby sustained... this is not just a research problem, because the nature of the left's interest in popular cultures and popular television also has strategic implications'. A view like Nicholas Garnham's (and presumably like that of Hall and Whannel, who are also pilloried) 'sanctions a paralysis, an inability to become involved.... The alternative? In general there can only be one, and that is to learn to deal effectively with the potential of things as they are, and as they will soon become. Outside of this there is only irrelevance....'

All these themes are worth dealing with in detail. The first problem is the perennial one for writers and critics of TV (not to mention producers themselves)—that of the inherent 'unknowability' of the TV audience, either individually or as an aggregate, in terms of the uses they are making of programmes, their selectivity, their part in the process of meaning, their prior assumptions etc. Current research-data, either quantitative or 'appreciative', is designed primarily for the benefit of advertisers and is next to useless for determining anything interesting in the realm of meaning. Having argued for the arbitrary nature of imputed effects of either popular or oppositional work, Connell never makes it clear why none of these problems apply to him: he seems to have an access into the homes and minds of working-class viewers which is quite breathtaking. What we all have to face is that all imputed effects, meanings, 'structures of feeling and thought' are basically intelligent guesses, working hypotheses, advanced on grounds which of course can be debated. But such hypotheses have to be made and the struggle around meaning waged accordingly, both in public discourse and, where applicable and possible, in practice.

However in Connell the 'identification' or 'understanding' of popular working-class patterns of viewing, 'structures of feeling', 'tastes' seems to be almost an adequate and sufficient end in itself. On the few occasions in which 'change' or 'development' of the media is mentioned, it's never even suggested how this might come about. (Does he share Garnham's

implicit left governmental/legislative approach, for example?) Indeed it's difficult to divine why it's even necessary, given the generally optimistic flavour of his analysis. Of course it's important to understand the structures of popular pleasure and taste – structures in which the critic her/himself is necessarily implicated, as all long-time adherents of *Coronation Street* at the BFI and on the *Screen* board will testify. But where does that understanding lead? To what purpose is our understanding of popular 'structures of feeling' to be put? These are the kinds of question Connell's commonsense populism doesn't answer.

What we have here is a sophisticated re-working of Hoggartian themes thirty years on, filtered through the worse excesses of 'culturalism' – a view in which working-class practices and preferences are exempted from criticism, particularly from postulated members of a 'middle-class intelligentsia'. (Hence Connell's sniping at any attempt to designate objects of working-class taste as 'racist' or 'sexist'.) A recent example of this school of thought is Dorothy Hobson's book on *Crossroads*<sup>6</sup>, which despite some admirable features (in particular its designation of such denigrated, 'down-market' TV as a valid object of study and discussion) ends up as an uncritical celebration of that series, on the grounds that working-class women, empirically sampled, claimed to enjoy its representation of their own domestic situations – situations neglected by the rest of TV.

Nevertheless, Connell and Hobson are rightly repelled by the image of the middle-class critic passing judgment on working-class pleasure and taste. Dorothy Hobson frequently cites the example of male, middle-class Fleet Street critics' sneering attacks on *Crossroads*, which they evidently don't watch and certainly don't enjoy, as a result of its (for them) alien form of address and its 'trivial' issues. This is the 'ineluctable drive' to evaluation which Connell criticises, and which for him applies as much to the denizens of Dean Street as it does to the 'Street of Shame'. But isn't he a little disingenuous in his presumption that any commentator can avoid 'evaluative' activity in the act of writing about the media? The mere selection of one programme or genre over another for discussion tends to ascribe value. Connell himself selects out the tradition of the critical documentary as

being worthy of remark, thus bestowing upon it a certain worth within the totality of TV. Interestingly, according to audience research, the critical documentary is not a genre massively beloved of the working-class audience – hence its relatively low ratings, which have been the major reason for ITV moving to jettison it. Could Connell explain how attention to the structures of taste and feeling of the working-class are going to help prevent its passing?

Perhaps one has to differentiate between 'criticism', with all its negative, evaluative associations, and 'critique' in the Hegelian sense of examining the hidden assumptions and structures of a work. But even then things can still go wrong, one's efforts can still be grossly misunderstood, as a personal example will illustrate. Quite recently Julie Sheppard and I, as fans of the wildlife programme, did an article on TV nature series for *City Limits*,<sup>7</sup> which attempted precisely to do what Connell prescribes – to look at the structures of pleasure associated with such popular programming, to plumb its attraction, to unravel why and through what mechanisms, both inside and outside the text, its delights work. Yet when it appeared, a common response was 'Oh, you were really hard on those wildlife programmes – you really don't like them, do you?'

While a recognition of the centrality of pleasure is an important corrective to the often sterile academic analysis of culture so often practiced in recent years, it's surely necessary to go beyond simple celebration. Laura Mulvey's work on spectatorship in classical Hollywood cinema has most influentially argued that its structures of pleasures are not neutral with regard to the sexes. And it's difficult to imagine giving a blank cheque to the racist joke on the grounds of its popularity or its opponents' lack of street credibility. What Hobson and Connell fail to acknowledge is the deep contradictions in structures of feeling, taste and enjoyment. We hope to be able to take forward these questions and their strategic implications for television in a future issue.

<sup>6</sup> Dorothy Hobson, *Crossroads: The Drama of a Soap Opera*, London, Methuen, 1982.

<sup>7</sup> Carl Gardner and Julie Sheppard, 'Nature: Raw or Cooked?' *City Limits*, May 21, 1982.



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# NEW IMAGES OF SCOTLAND

EDINBURGH '83, BY STEVE MCINTYRE

Over the past year or so, readers of *Screen* may have registered a plaintive sound coming from north of the border, as a handful of unpaid, unrecognised 'activists' attempt to kick an almost moribund Scottish film culture into life. Not Scottish film-making: those same readers cannot have missed the work of Bill Forsyth (too often invoked as the New Scottish Messiah), Mike Radford, Bill Bryden, perhaps even Charlie Gormley (director of Channel 4's *Living Apart Together*). Some might have noticed Mike Alexander and Doug Eadie's *How To Be Celtic* on Channel 4. There might even be a certain jealousy about conditions which seem to be creating space for an efflorescence of commercial independent film-making (a case of the core envying the periphery). Not film culture in Scotland: for historical reasons Scotland is blessed with the hitherto excellent Edinburgh International Film Festival (of which more below), and, for the last few years, the BFI Summer School has been visiting Stirling. Yet both events exhibit the general nature of Northern caravanserai for Southern visitors. Like the Edinburgh Festival itself: once or twice a year, people living and working in Scotland are presented with an opportunity to eat and drink deeply of culture, and supposedly build up a camel's hump, from which they can feed until the same time next year.

Both the upsurge of commercial film-making, and the tourist dimension of film culture are now being challenged; the one because the films themselves, it is suggested, reproduce a series of restricted and ultimately disabling discourses of Scotland (Tartanry, Kailyard, Clydesidism), while the second works against development of indigenous critical and institutional space for construction of alternatives. It is that space which is now being demanded, and within which

a genuine, progressive, Scottish film culture might become possible. Central to these demands are film workshops, where collective practice offers the potential for new discourses of and for communities themselves. They also suggest an alternative to individualistic auteurism, whether in the mainstream or (Scotland should be so lucky) the avant-garde. The issue of workshops has constituted a sort of unspoken subtext through the whole debate, occasionally flaring into explicit prominence.

Last year's Edinburgh Film Festival witnessed an attempt to map out the discursive terrain of filmic representations of Scotland, while simultaneously beginning to address inextricably linked questions of institutions which allow, if not actively champion, those representations.<sup>1</sup> This year, a somewhat truncated 'Scotch Reels 2', rejoicing in the inappropriate name of 'New Images of Scotland' looked at new films, at what progress had been made on the cartographical front, and, perhaps most importantly, at what steps had been taken in establishing new institutions, new groupings, and new critical forums.

Ironically apparent in the New Images sessions was a sense of *déjà vu*, of re-running old arguments. Not because the critical endeavour had been in suspended animation for the past year – presentations by John Caughie and Dave McKie on images of rural and urban Scotland opened up interesting areas of investigation – but owing to the cultural (and often physical) isolation of various bodies concerned with film, an awful lot of recapping was necessary just to bring the arguments to where they left off last year. There was little evidence of a continuing dialogue between opposing groups: a lesson for

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<sup>1</sup> Colin McArthur (ed), *Scotch Reels*, London, the British Film Institute, 1982.

- 54 the future. My purpose here in repeating that repetition is simply to make what follows intelligible to those unacquainted with the specific Scottish situation.

### Scotch Reels

The screenings, three-day discussion event and publication that comprised Scotch Reels last year was, in one sense, an intervention from outside in a perceived absence – an absence of serious and sustained interrogation of Scottish cinema by and within Scottish cultural institutions. It was a beginning of the process of identifying those discourses which cinema and television offer for construction of national identity: Tartanry – hills and glens, kilts and porridge, brawny men and cabers, clearances and Culloden (examples: *Brigadoon*, *Rob Roy*); Kailyard – a mawkish sentimentality centred upon community or family life (examples: *The Maggie*, *Whisky Galore*, and, arguably, *Local Hero*); Clydesidism – industrial heroism, and the socialist myth of John McLean (innumerable documentaries). Subsequent work has concentrated on representation of women as the ‘spirit of Scotland’ and traced their close,

almost mystical connection with the land and nature (Stella and Marina in *Local Hero*). These discourses, regurgitated and rearticulated through the history of screen representations of Scotland, serve a basic ideological function. In romanticising and mythologising an apolitical ‘Scottishness’, in celebrating defeat, nostalgia, and sentimentality, in applauding symbolic victory over real self-determination, they displace, even actually prevent, representations which would be of genuine cultural and political use within the contemporary Scottish situation.

This index of representations constitutes the framework within which Scotland is developed and provides the core motifs for any new work, whether that work is firmly locked within those discourses, or actively engages with and challenges them. Such is the structuring authority of Tartanry and Kailyard that it is not just work originating in America or England that activates them, but work from Scotland as well (although, by being targeted towards a non-Scottish audience, most work from Scotland cannot accurately be considered as of, and for, Scotland). It was precisely one of the main tasks of Scotch Reels and subsequent work in the arts magazine



Tartanry: the glens, kilts and nostalgia of *Brigadoon*.

*Cencrastus* (whose all-too-few pages of a media section provides the nearest thing Scotland has to a film journal) to look at how even home-grown products are deformed, and to address questions of what other discourses might be more progressive, and what forms might be appropriate to those discourses. Colin McArthur's insistence on a critical engagement with modernism, and his energetic championing of Murray Grigor's aggressively iconoclastic *Scotch Myths* put anti-realist practice on the agenda. On the other hand, John Caughie's reluctance to jettison naturalism (particularly with reference to television) prevented any easy drift to the eternally safe harbour of the avant-garde. At the very least these problems were raised, and have continued to animate the discussion throughout the subsequent year. It is essential that they further continue within the new groupings and new audiences currently being created by the emerging workshop movement.

### The Scottish film institutions

For historical reasons there are overlapping, and somewhat confused, responsibilities for film

culture in Scotland. Britain (and the British Film Institute) does not stop at the border, and money does find its way north: for the Edinburgh Film Festival, capital for cinema projects, subsidies for study courses and so forth. Without being a truly autonomous body responsible for, and able to fund, all aspects of film culture in Scotland, still less an arm of an overarching British film authority, the Scottish Film Council has tended to see its role as technical and service orientated. Unlike the BFI, which has recognised the great importance of the development of a coherent culture, promulgated through formal and informal educatory activity, the SFC has seen its primary cultural role as supporting the exhibition of international 'art' cinema in Scotland through a network of regional film theatres. Without denigrating this activity, its centrality to the SFC's work raises problems. Development of film theory allowed a politicisation of thinking about film and opened up questions of alternatives to mainstream practice. Defining art in apolitical terms, the SFC's implicit theoretical orientation has been towards a celebration of films (and directors) of aesthetic skill, merit, and good taste, at the expense of other approaches.



Scottish woman as nature: Marina in the rugged landscape of *Local Hero*.

56 Cultural and institutional ambitions converge and become identical in the practice of film production. The Council's definition of cinema (or at least any cinema worth talking about) as mainstream art/meretricious commercial film is the other side of its opposition to what it sees as the blanket rejection of recent Scottish films because saturated with Kailyard, Tartanry and so forth. Textual acrobatics on those films rescues directors of skill from ideological opprobrium. And justifies spending what money there is in Scotland to further this style of film-making. The assistant director of the SFC, John Brown, puts it something like this: oppositional film culture needs something to oppose, thus a priority for film production in Scotland must be a mainstream cinema. (This would be based on individual ability, or, as Charlie Gormley put it so trenchantly this year, 'bottle' and 'talent'.) Such an approach fails to register the point (often also forgotten in oppositional independent practice) that opposition, although possibly a start, is not enough. A progressive independent film practice cannot be content to remain locked in a sterile embrace with the mainstream, in a permanent relationship of distaste and dependence, but must construct alternatives outside of that framework.

Film production in Scotland is potentially healthy, with the recent emergence of a £100,000 Film Production Fund, jointly provided by the SFC and the Scottish Arts Council. This is, of course, in addition to any metropolitan sources of funding, although in the past little of this has ever found its way north. The fund is clearly much needed and very welcome, but serious criticism has been voiced over its constitution and implicit policy (forged in large measure by effective lobbying by the Scottish Association of Independent Producers). The SFC has attempted to appropriate the success of Bill Forsyth to validate the fund's mainstream ambitions. Its response to the valid objection that £100,000 does not go very far in feature film production, is to depict the FPF as primarily supplying 'seed money'—getting projects off the ground. Further, the backgrounds, and institutional settings of most of the fund's committee (dubbed 'the great and the good') heavily bias it towards mainstream cinema—no representatives from the nascent Scottish workshop movement, no spokespersons for other conceptions of cinema and no women. Having locked itself into this product/

'auteurist' framework, the FPF is unable even to contemplate the capital and revenue funding required by workshops. The SFC is thus able to murmur sympathetic noises, offer nominal help to workshops, but finally wring its (self-tied) hands in helplessness—no money. A chosen paradigm of film production is being offered as a given rather than as a systematised ordering of priorities, priorities which could be re-ordered if any real will, or any real commitment to alternatives, existed.

### The Edinburgh Film Festival

Reporting on last year's festival, David Will observed that 1982 was 'make or break year', but happily concluded that the intellectual energy created by Scotch Reels 'provided powerful evidence that the Edinburgh International Film Festival is once again alive and kicking'.<sup>2</sup> Wishful thinking. While Scotch Reels generated a certain energy of its own, that energy cannot be seen as a faithful barometer of the festival's vitality as a whole. Despite drastic underfinancing (if one thinks film is the poor relation of the arts in England and Wales, one should try Scotland for size); Edinburgh established itself during the seventies as one of the world's major film festivals. It also created a specific identity for itself by carving out a niche as an important site for articulation of theoretical developments. Central planks of the festival's work have been the championing of independent cinema of all descriptions, major 'intellectual events' and intelligent retrospectives. All three seem to be in the process of displacement from the focus of the festival as it shifts towards being primarily an exhibitory space for a more eclectic (commercial) body of films. With a very few notable exceptions (such as Antonio Reis and Margarida Cordeiro's *Ana*, Wolf-Eckart Bühler and Manfred Blank's *Pharos of Chaos*, Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames*, and an afternoon of new British work) the independent sector was undernourished and underrepresented. Dissatisfaction turns to anger on learning that films by Chantal Akerman and Chris Marker had been rejected because of little audience appeal. (If, so often, festivals are about the celebration of auteurs, they might at least be the innovatory and thought provoking ones.)

<sup>2</sup> David Will, 'Edinburgh', *Framework* 20, 1983, pp 49-53.

Last year's move to the commercial art/meretricious commercial duopoly was on its own terms successful, thanks to films like *Fitzcarraldo*, *The Draughtsman's Contract*, and *Diva*. This year, with few films of comparable appeal, the deliberate suppression of independent work, and not even the pleasures of an *ET* to compensate, the festival left a profound sense of unease.

This year's retrospective was a long overdue look at the work of Nagisa Oshima. However, the non-appearance of a planned book on the director (even the proposed 'less unintelligible' glossy book would have been more welcome than nothing) or any documentation on his work and its context, plus the absence of any formal discussion (apart from one hastily cobbled-together meeting in an upstairs room in the Filmhouse – after Oshima, and most of the festival, had departed) effectively torpedoed any educational claims for the event.

The remaining intellectual flagbearer was, of course, New Images of Scotland, plus a separate event on Canadian documentary organised by the John Grierson Archive at Stirling University and an admirable retrospective, with accompanying publication, on the Soviet puppet animator Starevitch. While the Film Festival is still the appropriate place for such events, its increasing drift towards the commercial makes them seem more and more urgent, even as they are being marginalised.

### New Images of Scotland

Two ironic concatenations set the tone. While participants at the event debated mythical representation, stereotyping and Tartanry, downstairs, in honour of Nagisa Oshima, the walls of the press room were bedecked with fans, kimonos and other icons of Japaneseness. Unable to influence the festival intellectually, New Images was further marginalised physically. Cast out into the wilderness of Filmhouse's Cinema 3 (36 seats), the 50 or so people who regularly crammed in there were forced to endure cramps from sitting on the floor and asphyxiation from the absence of proper ventilation. Staggering out one afternoon, it was galling to observe the conditions enjoyed by the celebrity panelists in a prestigious debate on television and film organised by Television South – specially imported padded leather armchairs, a raised dais, and all the Perrier they could drink!

New Images again ran the risk of parochialism levelled at Scotch Reels previously.<sup>3</sup> Parochial not because it refused to see Scotland and Scottish film-making as merely part of the British experience (and if Britain is healthy, so too must Scotland be), but because it did not pay sufficient attention to the struggles of other peripheries against cultural imperialism. In order to meet this criticism, a more wide-ranging event, 'Core and Periphery' had been planned, looking in particular at Quebecois cinema, and relating this to Scotland. Lack of interest, commitment and finance wrecked this scheme, fragmenting it to the separate Canadian documentary and Scottish events. If the spirit was willing in the original formulation of Core and Periphery, the flesh was weak in participation in its offspring: shamefully, almost no one from the Scottish event attended the Canadian documentary seminars. Earlier in the year at the Celtic Film Festival, useful parallels had been drawn and important bridges built between different peripheral groupings. It would be disastrous if that purchase on shared experience was lost, and each retreated to its own cabbage patch.

For some, the apparent immobility of the debate (repeating last year's polemics) was evidence of its academic sterility. Last year's had been characterised by Forsyth Hardy as 'windy theorising... that isn't going to bring film making in Scotland into the real world'. His reports in the *Scotsman* this year showed the same negativity. It is true that the opening session, a debate between Colin McArthur and John Brown, often seemed little more than a rehash of their correspondence in the *Glasgow Herald* or *Cencrastus*. Despite mutual agreement that the urgent questions were what sort of films Scotland needs and what structures might most satisfactorily bring about these practices, they clashed on just about everything else. While McArthur argued for seeing film in ideological terms, Brown rejected 'dogmatic assertions about politics' and asked what was wrong with the critical practice of celebrating individual talent. With two such incommensurable paradigms operating,

<sup>3</sup> Susan Barrowclough, 'A Critique of Scotch Reels', *Framework* 21, Summer 1983, p 57: 'The real dilemmas of a vibrant national cinema in Scotland could usefully be compared to the debates and cinemas which blossomed in the 1960's in countries like Cuba, Algeria, Quebec and later in Senegal, Portugal and the Philippines.'

58 it is perhaps unsurprising that this particular session was depressingly unproductive despite various insights offered on the films under discussion (*Ill Fares the Land*, *Local Hero*).

Yet this stasis was not symptomatic of other sessions. The debate is moving: from analysis to action; from criticism to establishment of new structures and institutions; from despair at limited and disabling representation to debates about alternatives and construction of new audiences. There are signs that the SFC is moderating its suspicion and possible hostility to the workshop movement. To a large extent this is thanks to continued activity over the past year, maintaining a high visibility: Glasgow Film and Video Workshop has started a series of day schools related to potential workshop practice in Scotland, and has been able to sustain a monthly newsletter; Third Cinema in Edinburgh has commenced a regular series of screening/discussion/education events on independent film-making. All of this testifies to an intellectual earnestness, rather than, as the SFC may originally have suspected, a small group of interested individuals on the loony fringes of academe, attempting to carve themselves a quick slice of the Film Production Fund. Similarly there is some hope that the Scottish Association of Independent Producers is beginning to look with less dismissive animosity towards its arriviste competitors. It might now begin to take seriously the intellectual integrity of the debate about filmic representations, and not see it as merely a case of careless talk costing livelihoods.

It is a pity therefore that, with the exception of Murray Grigor, no one from the SAIP thought it important to attend any more than the one session in which it was directly involved. There, their arguments hinged on actual film-making experience, a knowledge of 'bread and butter issues', rather than theoretical debate. While one might sympathise with their impatience at criticisms of films given the institutional and cultural restraints they face (Charlie Gormley: 'every film-maker tries to make the best film he can'), their tacit acceptance of current institutions and structures demonstrates a less than total commitment to new forms of cinema. Film Production Fund chairman Ian Lockerbie's observation that Scottish film-makers should 'get rid of their current obsession with expensive feature films' was timely. He coupled this with a gentle criticism of the lack of Scottish film-makers at the

Canadian event: documentary provided one model of small budget film-making and it was, he suggested, sad that Scotland had lost that tradition. The call to scale down was reiterated by Colin McArthur, who coupled it with an insistence on integrated practice.

The urgent need for film-makers, theoreticians, educationalists, community video workers to get together was underlined in the session of workshop practice where it was clear that different languages were being used. Several community film and video workshops already exist in Scotland but, like the SAIP, consider the New Images debate largely irrelevant to their needs. Such community practice is vital: it teaches audio-visual literacy, demystifies technique and offers a medium to mobilise support around important community issues. The substantial lacuna in this project is its conception of an ideologically neutral technology which can simply be turned to progressive ends without the critical endeavour of demystifying images and representations. This gap is the result of an historical separation of theory and practice which both groups now have an inescapable responsibility to bridge. Only in this way can workshops meaningfully collaborate with other groups, while steering between the Scylla of open access, and the Charybdis of a supposedly progressive auteurism.

Outside of Scotland such manoeuvres take place in safely existing alternative structures. At their inception, film-making workshops had a fairly clear operational paradigm formed in the avant-garde. That paradigm is now problematic, and Scotland is attempting to set up comparable structures without any well-defined alternative to offer. The question, 'what sorts of films will workshops produce?', is necessarily deferred to the future determinations of as yet unestablished structures and practices. Community-based workshops can operate a *tabula rasa* model given that they are basically facilitators. They are relatively easily accommodated by funding bodies. Similarly, individual independent projects can acquire funding (even if sometimes only with difficulty). However, a third model, based on an open-ended 'process' philosophy, which would develop projects out of an intersection of community concerns, practical and theoretical education and ongoing debate, poses problems for funders because of its hybrid nature.

Despite some heated exchanges, the workshop

sessions were heartening because they demonstrated a recognition of the urgency of the need to embark upon this debate (with women's groups, political groups, community groups) in order to begin to specify some of the parameters of the 'process'. These sessions also demonstrated a healthy awareness of the problems of intellectual elitism and, associated with this, the danger of automatic dismissal of the mainstream and equally automatic support for anything vaguely oppositional.

A similar intellectual open-mindedness was apparent in other sessions. John Caughie stressed the problems of all-encompassing categories such as Kailyard and Tartanry, and began to tease apart some of the various strands of Kailyard in films. In the debate surrounding Murray Grigor's *Scotch Myths*, some sharp criticism by Paul Scott and Stephen Maxwell pointed out how the film ran the risk of endorsing Tartanry by granting the myth more importance than it deserved, even while ridiculing it. Whatever the merits of this argument (and *Scotch Myths* is clearly not unproblematic), it is important to resist the temptation of elevating Murray Grigor

to the position of Messiah of the opposition.

Keen awareness of problems surrounding such notions as a 'Scottish' film culture and the danger of slipping towards national 'essences' was apparent throughout. There is no essence to provide a template for more 'accurate' discourses, no given national culture which is automatically progressive. Similarly, there is no easily adopted procedure for collective practice which would allow the construction of alternative discourses. Both of these problems are contentious, have been recognised as such and have been topics of sustained debate, both before and since *New Images of Scotland*.

This spirit of debate should convince the SFC and SAIP that they are not under attack by a monolithic, homogenous, theoretically implacable opposition. That recognition should facilitate the rebuilding of temporarily weakened lines of communication, and the opening up of links with other groups. The lesson from *New Images of Scotland* was the need to establish these links through debate, education, exhibition and hopefully production. If this happens, next year's festival might witness something genuinely new.

Sir Walter Scott composes fanciful titles ('Royal Hunting Dress Stewart') for woollens in *Scotch Myths*.





# A Sign is a Fine Investment

## A Film by Judith Williamson

From the 1890s until the 1930s, early advertising frequently used images of industrial work to sell its products, showing in detail the actual manufacture of goods advertised. Modern advertising, on the other hand, surrounds us with images of idealised homes and families, shopping and holidays, offering a world of consumerism in which work has become completely invisible. 'A SIGN IS A FINE INVESTMENT' investigates the way work has disappeared from advertising imagery, and traces this phenomenon through archive advertising films, magazine and television material, placing advertising in the context of historical events and everyday life. The film repeatedly returns to a 'set' of a domestic interior, similar to that used in many contemporary television advertisements, following a schematic 'day' in the activities of a housewife and family – the primary targets of advertising. On a TV set, and via back-projection, the modern ads invade this 'home' while the commentary follows the wider history of marketing and examines the economic and social factors which determine the visibility or invisibility of different aspects of our lives in the world of advertising.

Writer/Director: Judith Williamson  
Camera: Clive Tickner  
Additional Photography: Erika Stevenson  
Editors: Brand Thumim and Trevor Williamson  
Narrator: Fiona Trier

Colour 16mm 45mins 25fps

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Hire enquiries: Arts Council  
Film Library at Concord Films,  
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# 'SOMETHING ABOUT PHOTOGRAPHY THEORY'

A REVIEW BY  
VICTOR BURGIN

I've been asked to 'say something about photography theory'. My remarks this evening<sup>1</sup> are produced out of and into the context of photography education.

We're here to talk about theory. Many people are against it. Theory gets in the way of spontaneity. Theory is a realm of bloodless abstractions which have nothing to do with the cut-and-thrust of practice. For us, however, there is no state of Edenic innocence outside of theories. If we were ever in such a state, we lost it long ago when we learned to speak. If you can understand what I'm saying then your views of the world, whatever they may be, rest on a foundation of mainly tacit, unspoken, assumptions which make up the interlocking complex of theories we know as 'common sense'. As for spontaneity, Pascal asked the question: 'Who knows but that second nature is not merely first habit?'

All discourses rest on assumptions which imply theories about the way things are. All discourses are 'theoretical', the discourses we *call* theoretical are self-consciously so. Theory sets out to question the underlying assumptions of common sense in order to replace them, where necessary, with better-founded, or more comprehensive, explanations. In this it distinguishes itself from criticism. Criticism, as most common-

ly practiced, is concerned not with explanations but with value-judgements. To support his or her judgements the critic characteristically advances arguments which when examined rarely prove to be *arguments*, properly speaking, but rather *assertions* of opinions paraded as if their authority was unquestionable. Critical discourse tends to be studded with such untheorised items of common sense as 'greatness', 'originality', 'spirituality', and so on, most of which can be traced to humanist doctrines which emerged in the West in the transition from Medieval to Renaissance ways of thinking; to the liberal individualism which emerged in the seventeenth century, notably in the writings of the British philosopher John Locke; to the romanticism of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; and so on. Upon a foundation of romantic liberal-humanism there is most often then erected a formalist aesthetics derived, generally via Greenberg, from the English Bloomsbury Edwardians Clive Bell and Roger Fry; or the derivation may be *fin-de-siècle* symbolism; or nineteenth century realism; or an amalgam of a number of these theories. The implicit politics of such forms of criticism tends most often to be derived from Mathew Arnold: with the decline of religion only art can provide the spiritual cement which will keep the crumbling edifice of the *status quo* society from collapsing. My point in making these generalisations is simply this: the assumptions operative within criticism are theoretical, and they have a history. Both of these facts are suppressed within criticism, where the critic speaks as if the criteria being applied were unquestionably self-evident, timeless laws of nature.

<sup>1</sup> The School of Communication of Ryerson Polytechnical Institute, Toronto, is in the process of introducing courses in the theory of photography into its syllabus. Ryerson invited four speakers – Victor Burgin, Hollis Frampton, Allan Sekula, and Joel Snyder – to give public talks on the topic, 'Theory of Photography'; the talks were followed by a panel discussion. What follows is a transcript of Victor Burgin's contribution, given on September 30, 1983.

A second discursive regime overlaps and interweaves with criticism: this is 'history'. Whereas, in the school, the setting of criticism tends to be the studio, the setting of history is the lecture theatre. In fact, criticism and the history of photography are in a symbiotic relationship—the one could not survive without the other. The discourse of criticism throws up its subjects and objects of value, 'great' photographers and photographs, which it is then the business of history to arrange into meaningful narrative sequence. That this narrative is overwhelmingly one of linear descent, of *patrimony*, should alert us to the fact that, psychologically, like all good narratives, history is conceived in *Oedipal* terms. From a sociological point of view, it is the function of history to legitimate careers and commodities—history-writing as underwriting. In the history of photography we find the unargued assumptions of criticism projected into the past in order that they might return miraculously transmogrified into the indisputable 'facts' of history. There are, of course, exceptions—I'm talking about what is *normal*.

A third discursive regime, in the art and photography educational institution, most often found playing gooseberry to the love-affair between criticism and history, is what has alternatively been called 'liberal' or 'complementary' studies. Liberal studies means just that—you study to be a liberal. Casting my mind back to my art-school days: this week a bio-chemist shows slides of crystalline structures which may excite the painters and fabric-designers to a fever of creativity; next week an evangelical existentialist will convince us of our inherent capacity to forge the world according to our own life-project, all 50 of us. 'Complementary studies', when I was at art school, was liberal studies with a pedagogic conscience—an attempt to offer courses which were truly complementary to the field of study in question. It is here that there occurred the first stirrings of theory in the art and photography education syllabus, and it is here that the question arises, 'What theory is complementary to photography?'

Basically, theories may be distinguished one from another according to either their method or their object. I'll leave the question of method on one side for the moment; I'll come to it later. Most immediately, I think we would all be inclined to say, photography theory has its own

specific *object*. But there is a complication, theories don't simply *find* their object, sitting waiting for them in the world, theories also *constitute* that object. It seems reasonable to assume that the object of photography theory is, at base, the photograph. But what *is* a photograph? When photography first emerged into the context of nineteenth-century aesthetics, it was initially taken to be an automatic record of a reality, then it was quickly contested that it was the expression of an individual, and then a consensus was arrived at which perhaps has the strongest support today: a photograph is a record of a reality refracted through a sensibility. Put another way: what I see is something seen the way someone else saw it. I put it this way to bring out the emphasis on *seeing*: 'photography is a visual medium'. This is certainly where complementary studies overwhelmingly located theory—in theories of *vision*: the philosophy, psychology, and physiology of perception. We learned from these theories that a photograph does not replicate our act of perception, nor does our act of perception replicate the world 'as it is' (although what was meant *here* was never quite clear; I'll come back to this).

There are two main objections to conceiving of the theory of photography as a branch of cognitive psychology, either in this brute sense or in a more mediated sense—for example, by analogy with the psychologically informed theory of art put forward by Ernst Gombrich in *Art and Illusion*. In the first place, such theories of perception have nothing to say about the social world from which and into which photographs are produced. Secondly, the spectator—photographer, or member of the audience for photographs—the spectator assumed by such theories is itself an entity outside of society and history. Essentially, the spectating subject of such theories is a disembodied *eye*, albeit an eye connected to complex neurological/psychological circuits. The subject of such theories is without gender, race, class, age, or affectional preferences. Not to be able to talk about such things within the theory of photography would be a disadvantage. Clearly, we should not criticise a theory for failing to do what it never set out to do in the first place; equally clearly, theories of perception do not get us very far in our understanding of photography in its various uses. I suspect it is this very limitation of theories of

perception which allowed them a virtual hegemony within complementary studies in art and photography education – the fact that there is nothing in the theory which actually *contradicts* the tenets of dominant history and criticism.

One response to the ubiquitous tendency within the 'Fine Art' tradition to bracket out considerations of history and ideology in order to create a pure category, 'Art', which somehow gives birth to itself 'apart from', 'in spite of', 'above' lived social relations, has been to turn to sociological theories, particularly those based in the Marxist tradition. Marxist history and sociology seeks to restore the missing accounts of such things as the social and historical context of the images in question; the conditions of work, economic dependencies, and ideological affiliations of those who produce and consume such images. The spectating subject is now no longer simply an eye, the eye now belongs to a labouring body. This has been, and will continue to be, *necessary* work; however, when it claims to be both necessary and *sufficient* it is seriously disadvantaged by the legacy of an inadequate theory of ideology. Perception theories posit a simply given entity, the world of appearances, the realm of 'the visual', which is then inflected and nuanced in its passage through the image. A certain predominant form of Marxist analysis posits a simply given entity, the world of economic productive relations, the realm of 'the social', which is then inflected and nuanced – in a famous formulation, 'inverted' – in its passage through ideology. The abstract model in the otherwise incompatible approaches is the same: there is something concrete 'out there' which precedes representations, and against which the representations may be tested for their degree of correspondence to, or deviation from, the real. At its most reductive, this has allowed a certain type of Marxist sociology to assign images to a bipartisan form of classification in terms of their affiliation either to capital or labour, fostering that illusion of 'left' photographers that there is such a thing as a 'political' photograph – 'socialism in one image'. In rejecting, here, a certain simplistic form of Marxist theory I do no more than repeat arguments which have emerged over recent years from *within* Marxist cultural studies: the only world we can know is a world which is always already *represented*. Let me give a concrete example of the sort of shift in critical

perspective entailed by a rejection of the subject/object epistemology, particularly, the abstract model in which the perceiving subject compares a reality with its representation:

One of the most influential achievements of the women's movement, in the field of cultural theory, has been its insistence on the extent to which the collusion of women in their own oppression has been exacted *through* representations. Feminist theorists argued that the predominant visual and verbal representations of women in circulation in our male-dominated society do not reflect, re-present, a biologically given 'feminine nature', natural and therefore unchangeable. They argued that what women have to adapt to as their femininity, particularly in the process of growing up, is itself a *product* of representations. The question to be asked, therefore, in looking at, say, an advertising image of a woman – or, of course, a man – the question should not be, 'Is this a *true* representation of a woman, or of a man?', but rather, 'What are the *effects* of this image likely to be?' I'm reminded of Godard's remark: 'Ce n'est pas une image juste, c'est juste une image' – but of course it's never 'just an image', the image always *means* something, and it's in accordance with such meanings that people live and act.

This observation brings me to what I believe is the most important feature of the phenomenon of the photograph in society: photographs *mean*. The various forms of photographic practice contribute to the production, reproduction, dissemination, of the everyday meanings within the framework of which we act. I believe this fact is fundamental; we should not lose sight of it when we attend to other aspects of photograph – the photograph as a picture, or as a token in a system of economic exchange, or whatever. The idea of photography as something used to engender meanings has of course been with us as long as the notion, particularly prevalent during the heyday of the picture-magazine, that photography is a *language*. However, although it had long been common for people to refer to 'the language of photography', it was not until the late 1950s to mid-60s that there was any real interrogation of the supposed analogy between 'natural language' – speech and writing – and signifying systems other than language, systems like photography. These early investigations, conducted using the tools of linguistic analysis,

64 demonstrated that there is in fact no 'language of photography' as such, no singular, unique, system of signification upon which all photographs depend, in the sense in which all sentences in English depend on the English language. It was argued that there is rather a heterogeneous collection of codes upon which photography may draw, but very few of which can be said to be unique to photography. For example, all photographers know that the way they light a face for portraiture can 'say' something – ruggedness, spirituality, weirdness, or whatever – but such lighting codes can be seen at work in painting, or in the theatre, long before they are used in photography. The type of analysis I'm talking about, conducted from the standpoint of linguistics, is of course the type we know as *semiology*. The main gain of semiological analysis was in its deconstruction of the apparent 'naturalness' of the meanings produced when we look at photographs. We might remember that much of this work, in its earlier phases – I'm thinking particularly of the early Barthes, of *Mythologies* – much of this work was conceived of as a 'semioclassm', a breaking of images, of Marxist inspiration; which is to say it was conceived of as a work of 'demystification' – ironic, considering how mystified most people are when they first encounter the semiological texts.

Semiology came under *theoretical* attack, however, on this issue of the spectating *subject* implied by the theory. In semiology the subject is little other than an encoding/decoding machine: we still have a problem using the theory to connect the photograph to those factors like class, race, age, sex, which are so important to us all. Another, allied, problem stemmed from the sort of linguistics being used – all the encoding/decoding machines work the same way and understand the messages in the same way. If I send you a lump of cheese in a wrapper, it remains just that when you receive it; but if I send you a meaning in a photograph...? Actually, I've just been reminded of Mao's remark about the pear: to know the taste of the pear you have to *change* the pear by eating it. OK, forget the analogies, the point is that we can't leave our sex, age, class, etc., out of consideration in trying to understand the way meanings are produced. The question then became, '*how* is our subjectivity *involved* in producing meaning when we're confronted with a text?'

By the early 1970s semiology had undergone a radical transformation from within, in the course of which the linguistic model became displaced within a broader complex of mythologies – most notably those of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. In this second revolution in theory, all the more surprising in itself, emphasis was shifted, as the title of one of Barthes' essays from this period puts it, 'From Work to Text'. In structuralist semiology the particular object of analysis (novel, photograph, or whatever) was conceived of as a self-contained entity, a 'work', whose capacity to *mean* was nevertheless dependent upon underlying formal 'structures' common to all such works – the task of theory was to uncover and describe these structures. This approach provided what we might call an 'anatomy' of meaning production; however, as an 'anatomical' science, it was unable to say anything about the constantly changing 'flesh' of meaning. *Text*, as conceived of by Barthes (with the prompting of, most notably, Jacques Derrida and Julia Kristeva), is seen not as an 'object' but rather as a 'space' between the object and the reader/viewer – a space made up of endlessly proliferating meanings which have no stable point of origin, nor of closure. In the concept of 'text' the boundaries which enclosed the 'work' are dissolved; the text opens continually into other texts, the space of *intertextuality*.

For example, there's recently been in circulation, in England, an advertisement which shows a bottle of Vermouth and, standing in front of it, a glass slipper containing some ice-cubes and a measure of the drink. Well, instantly, when I look at this image, I'm referred to the story of Cinderella and its themes of rags-to-riches and romantic love, which in their turn can potentially hook into specific contents in my own personal history. I'm also referred to the idea of 'drinking from a slipper', the image of *fin-de-siècle* playboys and chorus-girls, and all this image may evoke in terms of physical sexuality. As a European of a certain age I'm reminded of the expression, 'on the rocks', which evokes *film noir* detectives in belted trench-coats sipping bourbon in piano-bars; and so it goes on. All of these associations, and more, belong to the fields of what Barthes calls the '*déjà-lu*': everything we already know and which the image may therefore evoke, whether by intention or not. These intertextual fields are themselves, of course, in constant

process of change, they are historically specific. The psychic processes by which any single image can spark an explosion of associations – visual and verbal images – are those of the *unconscious*, what Freud called the ‘primary processes’. The particular trajectories launched through the ever-shifting intertextual fields skip, stepping-stone fashion, and ‘dissolve’, along the traces of the spectator’s phantasies/histories. A consequence of this theory, informed by psychoanalysis, has been to further add to the theoretical model of the spectator: the body not only labours, it also *desires*. Clearly, then, there can never be any final closure of the meanings of an image; there can never be any question of arriving at the sum of signification, the parts will never add up to a non-contradictory whole. One result of ‘post-structuralist’ theory therefore has been to demonstrate the futility of any theology of *origins*, of meanings such as is present in the subject/object epistemology, the base/superstructure metaphor, and to which structuralism tended to revert in the idea of *structure* itself. Furthermore, and this has important consequences for photography theory, the concept of the intertextual generation of all meaning entails that we cannot theorise the production of meaning in photography without taking into account all other sites of meaning production within a given culture at a given moment in history.

In talking about theoretical approaches to photography I’ve so far mentioned cognitive psychology, sociology, semiology, and psychoanalysis. Clearly, photography theory has no methodology peculiarly its own. Equally clearly, the wide range of types of photographic practices across a variety of disparate institutions – advertising, amateur art, journalism, etc – means that photography theory has an *object* of its own only in the very minimal sense that it is concerned with signifying practices in which still images are used by an instrumentality more automatic than had been previous ways of producing images. This instrumentality, the camera and film, is itself in the process of changing, a change accelerating rapidly with the advent of the microchip. Photography theory therefore is not, nor is it ever destined to be, an autonomous discipline. It is rather an *emphasis* within a general history and theory of representations. And I should say, even though I only have time to say it in passing, that there is absolutely no reason for us to go on

talking as if this history and theory began in the nineteenth century. There is, for example, a wealth of pertinent history and theory – I’m speaking now from the point of view of semiotics – in the period from, roughly, the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. I’m thinking of the debates around the doctrine of *ut pictura poesis* which bound all picture-making in the Renaissance to considerations of discourse; I’m thinking of the tradition of the Emblem and the Impresa, where we can find so much of interest to more recent, psychoanalytically inspired, theories of representation.

In this almost infinitely extensive field of possible theoretical approaches there is no direction of work, in the name of photography theory, which is simply given to us in advance. The method(s) we select will depend on our goals – what do we want to *do* with this theory? For my own part, I can see no point in doing the work unless I can believe that it *matters* in some more than merely academic sense. I’ve said I believe that the most salient characteristic of photography seen in the context of history and society, is the contribution it makes to the (re-)production and dissemination of meaning. Since Foucault we can be in no doubt that the production of meaning is inseparable from the production of power. Photography inserts itself into the networks of what Foucault calls the ‘capillary action’ of power through its contribution to the nexus of desire and representation, which includes, for example, the question of who and/or what is represented and *how*. Photography theory can seek to reveal and account for the processes by which this contribution is made. Photography theory is itself engaged in this process through being now caught up in the apparatus of the educational institution. Caught up internally, where it is a matter of such things as competing discourses within the academic institutions, and the accreditation of future ‘experts’. And caught up externally, where it is a matter of the relation of the educational institution to the State and other ruling interests.

Here, we might remember the observation of that occasional, but influential, writer on photography, Walter Benjamin: even work with a radical content may nevertheless serve an apparatus which can do no other than perpetuate the *status quo*. We should be wary of the capacity of theory within the educational institution to

66 reproduce the authority structures of patriarchy in general. In my own teaching I must struggle—especially now, in the context of educational ‘cut-backs’—with the medieval legacy of the lecture theatre, and with the necessity of imposing a syllabus which must be enforced through an oppressive apparatus of examination and accreditation. I do not believe that the alternative to this alienating system is the sort of *laissez-faire* anarchy I encountered in my days in art schools. I remember a remark made by the Russian Formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky; speaking of a

friend he said: ‘He was educated as an artist, which is to say he wasn’t really *educated* at all.’ I’m thinking of that prevailing anti-intellectualism which presents itself as liberalism but which in fact is the masquerade of a petrified conservatism. I do not know, under the present circumstances, what the alternatives can be. I am sure however that, as a teacher, I must be judged for my progress on this front, as well as for the elegance of my presentations and the comprehensiveness of my bibliographies.

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# PHOTOGRAPHY— EDUCATION— THEORY

NOTES ON THE CURRICULUM BY  
SIMON WATNEY

Although degrees and diplomas in photography are offered in Britain exclusively from polytechnics and colleges of Further Education, this initial institutional uniformity guarantees nothing concerning the actual object of study. We may, however, distinguish between those courses which have been developed within the particular local traditions of *laissez-faire* art education, and those which set out to produce students whose work is geared towards the various commercial market-places of photography. Both types of course owe their existence to the complex institutional legacy of nineteenth century education, with its careful hierarchical polarisation of 'art' from mere 'craft' and 'industry'. At the same time both articulate their pedagogic intentions from the equally complex history of the ways in which photography has been theorised, since its invention, from the divergent perspectives of different areas of practice and employment—in other words from their specialised 'professional ideologies'.<sup>1</sup> To begin with, we should note that it has always been assumed that there exists a unitary 'thing', photography, which may be taught. But while it is evident that both types of course demand an equal degree of technical competence from students, it is also apparent that there is no consensus concerning what these students are supposed to do with their skills, or how they might move from any one area of practice to another. Quite the reverse. For deeply suppressed within the course-outlines offered to the would-be student of photography is the entire spectrum of uses to which the medium is

put, the conflicting theoretical 'explanations' of these uses, and the specific acquired photographic identities which accompany them.

In this context 'theory' is almost invariably understood as a *technical* category, covering the study of sensitometry, photo-chemistry, and so on. In this dominant usage, theory is regarded as an aspect of 'practice', quite distinct from whatever course of studies has been devised to complement the acquisition of technical skills and know-how. For it is a fundamental requirement of all such courses that they provide the student with some kind of 'complementary' studies, since it is assumed that the photographer is a distinct type of person, fundamentally 'non-intellectual', whose manual and visual talents are in need of compensatory academic instruction. It is at this point that the two types of course begin to take on clearly definable and frequently incompatible characteristics.

The student on a 'non-vocational' course will thus be introduced to those historical and critical discourses which are to frame and make sense of his or her work. These are structured around the pivotal figure of the Fine Artist, and operate in such a way that the student will come to 'recognise' his or her work and identity in terms of the familiar aesthetic discourses of self-expression, innovation, creativity, and so on. These values are anchored in an historical model of The History Of Photography which endlessly privileges the isolated figure of the photographer, struggling against vague but determined odds to establish a unique 'vision' of the world, and to impose this on a necessarily abstracted and equally unspecified audience. The student is thus encouraged to aspire to membership of this same pantheon of epochal photographers, in such a way that the very sense of social isolation-cum-

<sup>1</sup> Raymond Williams, 'The Writer: Commitment and Alignment', *Marxism Today*, vol 24 no 6, June 1980, p 24.



68 superiority which such an education engenders is read by tutors and students alike as further evidence of appropriately individual genius.

This framework of complementary studies is matched in 'practice' by a curriculum which sets students endlessly in competition with one another around the familiar circuit of photographic categories in which he or she is expected to shine – documentary, landscape, portraiture, and so on. It is in these terms, and through these seemingly discrete categories, that the student's work will finally be assessed. In each case a critical discourse of excellence, creativity, and originality is ceaselessly projected across the field of technical competence, providing the student with a highly sophisticated sense of what is 'appropriate' to different situations, as if this stemmed from his or her 'self' as opposed to the complex mediation of market forces, which inform the photographer's work at every stage in the production of a photograph, from the choice of camera, film-stock, and printing procedures through to the actual selection of subjects, accompanying texts, and so on. Such choices are however understood as signs of immanent 'talent' rather than the result of contingent knowledge. And in this constant dialogue between history and criticism, tutor and pupil, image and 'reality', the student succeeds or fails. It is perhaps worth pointing out, should my irony not be sufficiently clear, that in educational terms examination success within such a system is unlikely to evidence much in the way of genuine intellectual achievement, and vice versa.

The situation of the student who opts for a 'vocational' course in this period of mass unemployment is no happier. He or she will be introduced to the same canonical roll-call of 'great' photographers, whose work however will be regarded with an inevitable eye towards commercial appropriation. Last year's history of photography option provides the material for next year's advertisement dummies. This is perhaps marginally more honest than the vanguardist model which obtains for the non-vocational student, who is subtly abjured to admire, envy, and then supposedly completely forget everything that has been held up as excellent, in order to demonstrate his or her 'uniqueness'. History and criticism are thus more frankly aligned within vocational courses, since it is assumed that the student has already

decided which area of practice to pursue. For the student has been taken on to the course explicitly as an embryonic photojournalist, fashion photographer, or whatever, whereas the non-vocational student is secure only in the confidence of 'artistic' merit. The vocational student is thus provided with a more frankly training-oriented education, and can expect at the least a course in business studies of some kind, while a non-vocational counterpart will be lucky if he or she learns anything about the gallery system. Both types of course tend to be surrounded by what Stuart Hall once described as 'the sociology of everything', while students are carefully nurtured by 'successful' figures from their chosen areas of professional practice. Such studio training is therefore unlikely to offer much in the way of oppositional analyses of, say, 'News' photography, or Page Three pin-ups, or Fine Art practices. For behind all the discussions of style, lightening, and so, the student's work will ultimately be judged in relation to client satisfaction and sales returns, in markets whose own values and practices remain unquestioned.

If by any chance a lone voice from complementary studies is raised to problematise the criteria of professionalism which govern the studio and darkroom, it can only too easily be dismissed as 'merely' academic, or irrelevant because 'non-artistic'. In this way all interrogative intellectual work is automatically marginalised. And so, on both types of course, the pedagogy of the market is continually reproduced.

Both types of photographic education, however, converge around a core of key ideological issues. Central to these is the assumption that the photographer is, by his or her very nature, a purely visual individual. This point cannot be sufficiently stressed, and is the cruellest and crudest revenge of the professional and theoretical separation of writing from image-making in our culture. In photographic history and criticism its dominant formulation remains structured around Cartier-Bresson's notion of 'the decisive moment' – that moment which the 'true' photographer alone can recognise in any given situation, the one moment in which he or she is supposedly most closely in touch with that essential self to which photographic education endlessly addresses itself, the photographer's innate 'gift' to 'express' the 'truth'. What this system of thought can never ask is what we

actually mean by a gift, what expression materially consists of, and whose truth it is that the photographer is constructing.

This dominant tendency to fetishise the 'seeing eye' of the 'great' photographer in the discourses of history, and to fetishise the moment of exposing film in the discourses of criticism, is unfortunately as common on the Left as it is in mainstream photographic education. This is nowhere more obvious than in the work of John Berger, for whom 'photography does not deal in constructs' since, he claims 'there is no transformation in photography. There is only decision, only focus'.<sup>2</sup> And from a nearby eyrie, equally well feathered with Left-humanist pretensions, Peter Fuller would also reduce photography to the level of 'mechanical process', arguing that the central and defining work of the photographer is 'arrangement', which he regards as 'a relatively slight aesthetic skill, comparable to that which we use when ordering the objects

on a mantelpiece, or tidying the room'.<sup>3</sup> It is ironic that the formalist discourse of disinterested aesthetic values which such critics bring to bear on photography when they are unable to regard it as a direct political instrument, is widely shared within photographic education, which derives from much the same institutional and discursive backgrounds – Fine Art departments, state art-funding agencies, and so on. In this manner photojournalists, documentary and gallery photographers are equally taught to believe that their particular areas of practice represent some intrinsic and uniquely 'truthful' essence of the medium. But it is as absurd to claim that photography has a single, 'correct', essence as it would be to make the same banal demand of painting, or architecture, or film. It is one sign of the absolute poverty of mainstream photographic criticism in Britain that such preposterously reductive ontological assertions are incorporated wholesale into the curriculum of both vocational and non-vocational courses, as well as dominating the magazine literature for amateur and 'popular' photography.

As I have suggested, this is perhaps not so very

<sup>2</sup> John Berger, 'Understanding a Photograph', *Selected Essays and Articles*, London, Pelican, 1972, p 181.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Fuller, 'The Fatal Facility', *New Society*, vol 64 no 1066, April 21 1983, p 107.



Posy Simmonds cartoon from the *Guardian* May 31, 1982.



instructed by the copy-writers of the legion weekly and monthly photography magazines, which are themselves little more than adverts for the multinationals.

Thus photography remains what it has always been, a paradigmatic and exemplary model of capitalist production, as both a labour process and a system of valorisation. It is equally clear that the divisions of labour within photography are also divisions of knowledge and identity, and it is at this point that photographic education begins to make more extended sense as a system which is continually involved in reproducing not simply a range of commodities in a patriarchal capitalist society, but also the dreams, fantasies and subjectivities which underpin it. Any amount of sociology, Marxist or otherwise, can be lined up behind the primary 'practical' curriculum of photographic education, as long as the basic opposing categories of vocational to non-vocational and amateur to professional are preserved intact. There is thus little point in trying to recover 'lost' or 'marginalised' areas of practice such as workers' or womens' or gays' photography for the curriculum if that curriculum itself is perpetually doomed to be marginalised in the student's daily round from studio to seminar room, and thence, decked out with all the equipment which has survived the latest round of education cuts, to the 'real' world. For that world will inevitably be constructed by the photographer according to the categories and values which she or he has been taught to 'recognise' – the world as an endless scenario of potential assignments, each one of which only serves to confirm the authenticity and authority both of the student's 'vision' and of the institution which directs it. In effect this is rather as if film were to be taught and assessed exclusively by 'anti-realist' avant-garde purists and television commercial executives.

It is against this backdrop that another tendency in photographic education has established itself in those few polytechnics where there is no strong Fine Art tradition, and where the concept of photographic theory is defended against the pressures of direct market forces. Principal among these is the degree in Film and Photographic Art at the Polytechnic of Central London. At the risk of seeming to blow my own trumpet, since I teach on this course, I think it remains necessary to note that whatever takes place at PCL proceeds from an initial refusal to

prioritise 'practice' in relation to 'theory' or, for that matter, vice versa. Victor Burgin, who also teaches on the course, proposes a summary of priorities in contemporary issues in photographic theory elsewhere in this issue of *Screen*, but it is worth pointing out that the 'theory' curriculum at PCL involving psychoanalysis, semiology, discourse analysis and so, depends on the power, within the institution, to define the 'intellectual field'<sup>5</sup> which photographic studies might occupy in opposition to the pedagogy of the Fine Art and industrial markets. As I have suggested, this power does not reside in the vast majority of photographic courses. Nor, I should add, is it generally sought. In this respect photographic theory must necessarily be as sceptical concerning claims about the 'creative autonomy' of the individual photographer as it is of the working practices embodied in the pedagogic categories of documentary, Fine Art, photojournalism, and so on, as defined in advance by the moguls of Fleet Street, the Tate Gallery, or wherever.

For it is the task of 'theory' to raise precisely those questions which the aesthetics of 'the decisive moment' suppress. In place of 'the sociology of everything' we need to be able to account for the operations of the social and the psychic in the photograph. The curriculum must therefore be flexible enough to consider the historical emergence of those discourses which make up the basic organising categories of photographic 'common sense', as well as providing an accessible alternative to the overlapping discourses of self-expression, direct perception, artistic integrity, and vulgar realism with which most students will be only too familiar. It goes without saying that this cannot necessarily be a painless process for students coming to the course from any background. For if 'theory' is problematising those categories from which photographic identities are constituted, then it follows that lived identities themselves will be questioned. Hence the emphasis on collective work, at least in the early stages of the course, and continuing group criticism sessions which provide a support system in which problems or difficulties can be shared.

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<sup>5</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, 'Intellectual Field and Creative Project', in MFD Young (ed), *Knowledge and Control*, Open University Press, 1971, p 161.

72     Photographic theory, as I have outlined it above, is therefore involved in a large-scale 'catching up' operation, especially in relation to film theory and education, which has already established an impressive curriculum around such concepts as suture, interpellation, sexual investment in representation, and audience-oriented aesthetics in general. Needless to say, the discussion of these concepts is of critical importance to any serious theoretical work on still images, work which remains simply inconceivable on most photography courses, with their continual displacements from representation to either 'the real' or the individual photographer. Photographic theory thus directs itself towards the establishment of a debate-based photographic culture, on a par with that which has been instituted in film studies by SEFT and other organisations. And since it remains the case that the dominant tendency in British photographic theory and criticism

represents nothing less than a bizarre crossing of Bazin with Bloomsbury, peppered with more than a dash of Reaganomics, it is hardly surprising that there is still a long way to go. For the photo-theorist is up against the entire apparatus of reflection- and expression-based criticism, backed up by one of the most profitable and resourceful industries in the modern world. So if our work requires a certain degree of intellectual rigour on the part of students and photographic educationalists alike, – concerning distinctions between political and ideological struggles for example, which raise serious and even 'difficult' questions about the very nature of photographic signification – then I can only conclude that such work is long, long overdue.

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This article is based on a seminar led by the author at the Department of Cultural Studies, the University of Trent, Ontario, in March 1983.

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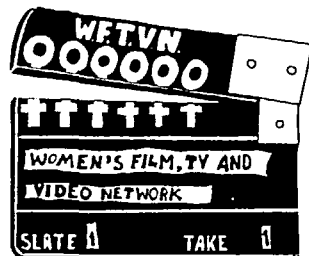
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# SOUND CINEMA

## ANDREW HIGSON REPORTS ON A RECENT SEFT EVENT

The stresses and metaphors of film theory, from the silent period to today, produce cinema as a primarily visual medium. Sound—the construction of sound space, the narrative ordering of sound, the relation between sound and image, the invocation of the cinema *auditor*—is the murkiest area of film theory. And yet, the presence of sound has, throughout the history of cinema, been posited as vital to dominant cinema's inherently *realist* ideological project.

In this context, the recent weekend event on 'Sound Cinema' at the Triangle, Birmingham<sup>1</sup>, was an important attempt to redress this imbalance and begin to focus on the semiotics of sound and the aural positioning of the spectator as always also an auditor. There have been some other recent theorisations of cinema's placing of sound—notably the *Yale French Studies* volume on 'Cinema/Sound'<sup>2</sup>, which a number of the papers at the Birmingham weekend drew upon. But on the whole, it remains the case that cinema is thought of as much more the site of visual pleasure than of aural pleasure.

Thus at the most common sense level, we talk of going to *watch movies* (i.e. moving pictures) while the equally (in)appropriate term, the *talkies* (i.e. talking pictures), no longer has a wide cur-

rency. At a more technical level, as Rod Stoneman pointed out in his introduction to the weekend, sound *reproduction* or *recording* is often discussed alongside a notion of images as *representation*, implying that sound recording is a much more neutral activity, involving minimal mediation of the 'real world' of sound. And even that psychoanalytically-based film theory which has proved so fruitful over the last ten years or so has privileged the visual, as in its analogy of the 'mirror phase' and the conditions of cinema spectatorship—although, as Nancy Wood made clear in her contribution to the weekend, it is certainly not the case that the psychoanalytical framework is unable to accommodate a theorisation of cinema sound.

In general, it may be true to say that sound in the cinema has only ever been attended to when it calls attention to itself and exceeds its primary function of supporting the image-based flow of the classic realist film. The papers at the Sound Cinema weekend were concerned with the various ways in which the audibility of sound is ordered and regulated—and precisely rendered narratively unobtrusive. Norman King, like Noel Burch<sup>3</sup> elsewhere, performed the apparently impossible in discussing the sound of 'silent' cinema. Nancy Wood addressed herself to the competing accounts of the transition to sound in Hollywood and developed an elaborate theory of narrative film sound. Mandy Rose, a freelance sound recordist in independent film and broadcast television, was able to relate current sound practices and professional ideologies to the dominant 'realist' ideology of cinema and television. Simon Frith examined the operations and effects of narrative film music. Finally, Rod Stoneman introduced a number of films adopting alternative means of sound/image combination to those familiar from Hollywood cinema.

Silent films were never in fact projected in silence: the French term 'mute cinema' is much more appropriate: from the point of view of the

<sup>1</sup> Co-sponsored by SEFT and the Triangle Cinema, Birmingham, Oct 29-30, 1983. *Screen* will be publishing a number of the papers presented at the weekend in a future issue.

<sup>2</sup> *Yale French Studies*, no 60, 1980. See also Stephen Heath, 'Narrative Space', 'Body, Voice', and 'Language, Sight and Sound' (passim) in *Questions of Cinema*, Macmillan, London, 1981, pp 19-75, 176-193, and 194-220. Also John Ellis, *Visible Fictions*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1982, pp 38-61.

<sup>3</sup> See Noel Burch, 'How We got into Pictures: Notes accompanying Correction Please', in *Asterimage* 8/9, pp 36-38. Also paper read at SEFT/East Midlands Arts weekend school, 'Putting Narrative in Place', December 10-12, 1982. Review of weekend by Mick Eaton in *Screen*, July-October 1983, vol 24 nos 4-5, pp 142-144.

ideological aspiration towards an analogical realism, what was felt to be lacking was the presence of the human voice in lip synch with the body in frame. King's paper focused on Abel Gance's experimentations with music and/or voice and the image in the French 'art' cinema of the late 'teens and 1920s. For Gance, music was never simply an accompaniment for the images, and often indeed was the founding idea either for the development of narrative action (characters composing and performing music within the diegesis – as in the 'singing of La Marseillaise' sequence of *Napoleon*, 1927) or for the formal organisation of the images. Parts of *La Roue* (1922), for instance, use music as the basis for the rhythm, the dynamic or the theme of the images, determining the idea of the film ('a symphony in black and white', as Gance called it) for which a now lost score was especially written by Arthur Honegger. Gance, of course, was not alone in resorting to musical analogies in the development of a theory of film. Eisenstein developed his theory of montage in musical terms in distinguishing between metric, rhythmic, tonal and overtone montage.<sup>4</sup>

King argued that these various ways in which

both popular and 'art' cinema called upon the traditions and musical forms of Western classical music culture were all part of that whole move up-market by silent cinema in the 'teens and '20s. The connotations of high culture and respectability were part of the appeal to bourgeois audiences. Music in the silent cinema thus became a kind of guarantee of Art, distinguishing cinema from theatre and the novelistic. Perhaps we should remember, however, that it is not music in general, but a specific Western classical tradition in particular (as Simon Frith indicated in his paper) which had this effect. The use of other, popular cultural traditions of music could easily have maintained early cinema's allegiance to vaudeville, variety and the fairground (a tradition maintained in, for instance, the British music hall films of Gracie Fields and George Formby).

Music was one means by which a common imaginary space was constructed for spectator and fiction in silent cinema, its presence com-

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<sup>4</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form*, Harvest/Harcourt, New York, 1949. Originally published in 1934.



The 'Marseillaise' sequence in Abel Gance's *Napoleon*.



pensating for the lack of the lip synch voice (and drowning the sound of the projector).<sup>5</sup> But as Nancy Wood pointed out in her paper, while music (along with a specific sequencing of images, a use of intertitles etc) might be important in silent cinema for constructing a sense of continuous duration and coherent space, devices such as intertitles and figurative images, as well as the different temporality and presence of music, could, at the same time, disrupt the implied homogeneity of time and space.

The central axis of Wood's paper was the question of whether cinema's Institutional Mode of Representation (to use Burch's term) was radically transformed by the transition to sound, or consolidated by this potential 'gain in realism'. On the one hand there is what Wood calls the 'rupture thesis', which stalks the pages of the popular histories of cinema, representing the transition to sound as a cataclysmic event for aesthetics, technology and the spectator/auditor. On the one hand there is the 'continuity thesis' which denies any irreconcilable opposition between late silent and early sound cinema, and asserts that their modes of representation are of the same order, since sound is appropriated by and for the dominant narrative realist ideology of Hollywood cinema.

It was this latter position for which Wood argued, examining the ways in which the spatial and temporal codes of late silent cinema's construction of a coherent diegetic universe were taken up and to a certain degree modified by early sound cinema's audio-visual constructions. Dominant cinema's institutional mode of representation was thus consolidated rather than shattered by the transition to sound, although clearly the addition of synchronous recorded sound and particularly the human voice meant a certain shift at the level of the specific devices involved in this construction of an homogeneous fictional world. The major effect, Wood argued, was the more palpable articulation of the spatio-temporal field, which was, in her terms, 'densened' or 'thickened'.

Sound cinema established a particular relation-

ship between speech, background music and ambient sound. Crucially, the voice as the presence of the body in frame must be audible as a

major support for the fiction, while the management of sound effects is one of containing their presence (which is necessary to the realist effect) and circumscribing their intrusion upon the spectator/auditor's attention. The image dominates the proceedings. The construction of sound space merely completes and confirms the efficacy of the image. As Stephen Heath puts it, sound in narrative cinema is always *optical*.<sup>6</sup>

Wood also broached the issue of how the transition to sound in Hollywood affected the positioning of the film spectator who now was able to identify with what is seen *and heard*. Following Doane<sup>7</sup>, Wood pointed out that the introduction of synchronous speech for the first time made present the *speaking* subject, the body invested with visual and aural attributes – the *unified* body. Simultaneously, the 'denser' representational space of the early sound film meant a much securer insertion of the subject into that space. Further, the voyeuristic pleasure of looking was doubled by a far more rigorous stimulation and management of the invocatory drive and pleasure in hearing than silent cinema had ever been able to achieve. The implication was that film theory's recognition of the *primacy* of the visual in cinema is not at fault – what is unwarranted is its simple neglect of the aural.

Mandy Rose's contribution testified to the extent to which the current ideologies and strategies of sound management reproduce those on which the initial transition to sound was made. The technicians' task remains one of producing something which appears as *unproduced*. The development of sound technology and technique has always been in the name of realism, seeking gains in smoothness, effortlessness, holding the attention always to the signified.

Television once more asserts the primacy of the voice, even more than in cinema, calling the viewer/listener's attention to segments of television's flow. Television's voices are ever present, continually speaking to us. And, Rose pointed out, TV plays on our recognition of these voices, our familiarity with them, carrying us across the images – 'reading' them to us in many cases (the news, continuity, current affairs, chat shows, quiz shows etc – wherever there is a presenter), recalling silent cinema's lecturer. The voice is authoritative, and, inevitably, regulated

<sup>5</sup> See Noel Burch, *op cit*.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Heath, *op cit*, p 178.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Ann Doane, 'The Voice in the Cinema: the Articulation of Body and Space', in *Yale French Studies*, 'Cinema/Sound', no 60, 1980, pp 33-50.

according to gender.

Simon Frith's discussion of narrative film music concentrated on two main areas: the conventionality of the associative meanings of music, and the work of music in relation to classic realist narrative films. In arguing his first point, that there is a fairly clear coding of the connotations of music for the listener, he was thus disputing Schoenberg's claim that 'music never drags a meaning around with it'. Once more, it became necessary to recognise the primacy of the visual in acknowledging that these connotative meanings of music are very often thought about and discussed in terms of images—a point of obvious importance when thinking about the development of the use of music in films. Thus certain forms of music, or certain instrumentations or sound mixes, are conventionally associated with particular representations of space (e.g. American symphonic music associated with the wide open spaces of the western); particular temporal organisations; or particular emotions, moods, and hermeneutics (e.g. the recognition of certain forms of music as appropriate for the hermeneutics of suspense).

Frith's second area of attention related this issue of the codification of music and associative meaning to the issue of realism and the narrative film. As Claudia Gorbman has pointed out, 'it is not difficult to realise that the soundtrack takes many more liberties with the diegesis than does the image track'<sup>8</sup>—and certainly it is music which seems to pose the most problems here, background music in particular being apparently the least 'natural' of the elements that make up the image track and sound track of the narrative film. But the naturalisation of narrative film music by convention has rendered it real, truthful, authentic—such that a romantic scene without strings seems less 'real' than a romantic scene with string accompaniment. Frith suggested two possible modes of reality and authenticity with regard to film music: firstly, its ability to establish an emotional reality, where music serves as an emotional trigger, revealing the true feelings of characters; and secondly, an ability to estab-

lish an authenticity of time and place—music is clearly coded in relation to historical time and geographical place. Such coding of narrative film music makes it difficult to take the apparently obvious distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic music very far. Thus even music which is clearly marked as produced other than within the narratively implied spatio-temporal world is, through the cultural-cinematic coding of that music, in a sense diegetic: it 'reads' (sounds?) as diegetically appropriate. Music, as it were, becomes part of the soundscape within which people live (*American Graffiti* is an obvious example here).

Noel Burch has suggested that the sound-image relation is 'the fundamental dialectic in film'.<sup>9</sup> This is hardly something that would immediately spring to mind in watching—and listening to—a classic Hollywood film. But a number of films were shown during the course of the Sound Cinema weekend which challenged the familiarity of sound confirming image. Ever since Eisenstein, Pudovkin and Alexandrov's *Statement on the Sound Film*<sup>10</sup>, there has been a desire on the part of what inevitably seems to be the avant-garde for some form of counterpoint or non-synchronicity between sound and image, or some disturbance of the primacy of the image. Of all the films shown at the weekend, it was certainly Godard's *Passion* which took this non-synchronicity and disturbance furthest—although even then one might accuse the film of simply playing with possibilities. The other films all worked on combinations of music and images which now seem sadly familiar from the television screen—with the possible exception of Frank Abbott's marvellously rich and comic *Scarborough Fair* (GB, 1976), reminiscent of John Smith's films, *Girl Chewing Gum* (GB, 1976) and *Associations* (GB, 1975). Music programmes such as *The Old Grey Whistle Test* and *Top of the Pops*, and now the obligatory pop videos, have always been the site of most visual experimentation on British television, recognising that it is for once the music or song which holds the attention, allowing the images to take on the role of accompaniment, no longer bound to the task of conveying crucial information. Derek Jarman's *TG's Psychic Rally in Heaven* (GB, 1979) seems only slightly more punk and abstract than many of the short films shown in such musical contexts. The other area of television which makes the formal strategies

<sup>8</sup> Claudia Gorbman, 'Narrative Film Music', in *Yale French Studies*, 'Cinema/Sound', no 60, 1980, p 196.

<sup>9</sup> Noel Burch, *Theory of Film Practice*, Secker and Warburg, London, 1973, p 90.

<sup>10</sup> In Sergei Eisenstein, op cit, pp 257-260.

78 employed in these films seem familiar is, of course, advertising.

*Romance Sentimentale* (Eisenstein and Alexandrov, France, 1930) was clearly an important early experiment in the use of non-diegetic sound, although it often seems less in counterpoint with the image than 'emotionally' produced by it: these are music's visual images, which have now by convention almost become part of our everyday. In other words, many of its experimentations again are not unexpected.

The case of *Now* (Santiago Alvarez, Cuba, 1964) seems to summarise the problem—the formal combination of song and footage here is hardly radical, and it is really only a musical version of the documentary or television news voice-over. It is the political irony produced which is radical. There is then a certain danger of fetishising the notion of counterpoint. Indeed, Simon Frith pointed out that many contemporary films, such as *An Officer And A Gentleman*, use a theme song which, when played at the end of the film, acts as a sort of commentary on the action. Formally, this is not so dissimilar to the effect of some of Weill's songs in *Kuhle Wampe* (Brecht and Dudow, Germany, 1931). At the same time, screening these films in the context of discussions of sound in the cinema is an extremely useful way of pointing to the strategies by which certain sound-image relationships are constructed as *natural*—each of the films does to some extent draw attention to the conventional means of binding together sound and image.

To return to *Passion*, it was here that we saw the most *unexpected* dislocation of sound and

image, with its fragments of music, its emphasis on off-screen sound as opposed to the body in frame speaking, and a radical non-synchronicity of voice and lip movement throughout the film. It is a perfect example of 'the attempt to hear the voice against the orders of cinema'<sup>11</sup> which Stephen Heath sees as characteristic of the work of Godard, Straub/Huillet and Duras. In typical Godardian manner, *Passion* seems to be seeking the *correct* relation of sound and image: the text *struggles* to produce meaning, to produce a story (Isabelle Huppert literally struggles to speak). Its story in the end is one of a *mismanagement* of sexual and labour relations, of money, politics and cinema, *of sound and image*.

Conventional sound practice could hardly tolerate such mismanagement (Godard had to use a student sound recordist for *Passion*, having been turned down by a number of 'professionals'). As one of the standard editing manuals puts it:

*Should the sound-track of a film be arresting in itself? There is a danger that a sound-track which requires this special attention from an audience may become an intolerable nuisance.*<sup>12</sup>

The Sound Cinema event was important precisely for the steps it took to set out what is at stake in this 'intolerable nuisance'.

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<sup>11</sup> Stephen Heath, op cit, p 190.

<sup>12</sup> Karel Reisz and Gavin Millar, *The Technique of Film Editing*, Focal Press, London, 1968.

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# LETTERS

**From Paul Willemen, the British Film Institute, 127 Charing Cross Road, London WC2:**

I am puzzled at the vehemence with which Paul Kerr ('My Name Is Joseph H Lewis', vol 24 nos 4-5) dismisses and misrepresents some of the remarks I made in 1980 about Joseph H Lewis's films (reprinted in *Framework*, no 19). I am accused of High Cultural Pessimism and radical puritanism, of doing a disservice to film history and film studies, of returning to prestigious theatrical values prevalent in pre-auteurist days, of being as reactionary as Lewis' own most reactionary film tribute to the American attack on Korea, etc.

My puzzlement stems from the fact that Paul Kerr's useful article is in fact both a confirmation and an elaboration of the very remarks he so violently seems to attack. My paper for Edinburgh 1980 took distance from the efforts to make Lewis into yet another 'auteur', something Paul Kerr claims as the ambition of his own article too. I started from the assertion that 'The films of Joseph H Lewis fall squarely within the most intensively auteur-ized period of the American cinema, and yet, his work remains virtually unknown.' Paul Kerr confirms this point while providing a somewhat weak explanation by pointing to the lack of promotion of a 'B' director's work: 'It received less press coverage, fewer prints were struck, its theatrical run was brief.'

This is true of that type of cinema, but it cannot do service as a sufficient explanation either for Lewis' status as a problem for auteurism or for the interest in his work in Britain in 1979/80. My thesis was – and still is – that 'Between Pearl Harbour and the Bay of Pigs, the Hollywood looking machine was slowly transforming itself.... In the process of transition, something... happened to the look of Hollywood

films. Probably something related to the peculiar conjunction of technological, institutional and ideological changes that affected the industry at that time.' In tracing some of these changes, Paul Kerr confirms that thesis and proposes that the production of individual differences and idiosyncrasy had become an economic/ideological imperative at that time, imposing the need, especially on 'ambitious B' directors, to make a name for themselves by standardising a 'style' for purposes of recognition and reward. This is the best explanation I have read so far as to why a different 'look' began to dominate (or at least to characterise) a specific sector of Hollywood production. Unfortunately, Paul Kerr doesn't relate this valuable observation back to his own rather contradictory remarks about the 'Lewis-as-auteur' problem.

Apparently disagreeing with my remark (quoted in his article) that it would be possible to construct a thematic coherence covering a substantial proportion of Lewis' work, he goes on both to confirm and to deny that remark: on the one hand, he is as scornful as I am of 'the desperate search of anachronistic auteurs' hunting for thematic coherence, but on the other hand he then ('nevertheless') does suggest, in spite of claiming that this may not be possible, precisely such a coherence around the themes of 'identity' and 'the name' – which makes the title of his article a little more ironic than may have been intended. The point is that we agree that such a coherence can be constructed if one absolutely wants to and we also agree that hunting for such a coherence would constitute a disservice to film studies. If Paul Kerr than had related his remarks about auteurism to his own observation about the economic/ideological pressure on directors such as Lewis to 'make a name for themselves' in terms of a distinctive stylistic hallmark, he would have arrived exactly at my starting point, having provided a cogent and solid account of the institutional/economic factors which I had neglected to specify when formulating the general hypothesis advanced in Edinburgh (where I used Lewis' work as material for debate in the context of a festival and its politics within Britain).

I am grateful to Paul Kerr for showing that my hypothesis was well founded. In fact, a further 'agreement' between us emerges when Paul points to 'a style' as at issue in the way these

82 films inflected the Hollywood looking machine. It is that issue, rather vaguely characterised in Paul Kerr's article, which I tried to address more specifically in terms of 'the look' sustaining cinephilia, the desire for cinema inscribed in films at that time (especially in 'ambitious B' movies) and found, i.e. constructed, largely but not exclusively (see Raymond Durnat's writing), by the kinds of post-surrealist critics in France who also founded auteurism and whose general approach worked through into the 'New Wave'. The changes Paul described did produce, as he acknowledges ('a style') a look which cinephiles unerringly return to, making that period of Hollywood the object of cinéphilie par excellence (and its continuation in 'noirish' TV series the object of a nascent telephilie). However, it is for this fairly uncontentious proposition – the accuracy of which Paul Kerr's own article confirms – that he reserves his most vituperative and, unfortunately, misdirected comments.

Granted that my cursory remarks about Lewis' films having unchallenging scripts, haphazard acting and 'unfailingly reactionary' ideologies were a little sweeping. But instead of criticising such phrases for being meaningless unless the criteria applied are specified (which they weren't in my paper), Paul simply counterasserts that six of the scripts were 'excellent', also without specifying on what basis that conclusion could possibly rest. Ironically, Paul then goes on to admit that these six 'excellent' scripts were screwed up by Lewis himself, who 'failed to match them'. Besides, 'excellent' and 'unchallenging' are not mutually exclusive. My 'unfailingly reactionary' phrase is open to the same objections: either it is backed up with analysis or it is meaningless. I didn't back it up. Partly because of an impatience with the repetitive and excruciatingly boring 'textual analyses' agonising over whether a film is progressive or not, usually by critics ferreting out the odd 'contradiction' or 'fissure', ignoring the hierarchisation of discourses within texts and within cinema as an institution, in an attempt to justify or rather absolve themselves for having derived some pleasure – from a Hollywood or an Art movie they suspect of being politically dodgy (often with good reason). This impatience, I think, is shared by Paul Kerr. However, he then goes on to 'refute' my too impatient dismissal of progressive/reactionary games by pointing to Lewis' collaboration with

people who were blacklisted in Hollywood, as if that constituted proof of progressiveness. If one rejects those games, there is no point in playing them only halfheartedly.

Finally, and perhaps more seriously, Paul reads 'High Cultural Pessimism' and 'radical puritanism' in my, on the whole positive, polemic (at least in England today) in favour of cinephilia, which I characterised as 'the ability to acknowledge a desire for cinema' as such, the insistence on the necessity of scopophilia as a constituent element in cinema (a theme I have consistently defended since Laura Mulvey's article on Visual Pleasure in 1975) even though the 'joy of looking' must, by itself, be politically irresponsible because a-social. The question of political responsibility depends on what kind of secondary elaboration, i.e. what kind of 'cover' is provided, by the film and by the viewer, for indulging that desire. In Lewis' case, I argued, there is virtually no such cover, hence his status as a 'problem' for auteurs. As for the cover provided by the viewer, that is, *the way* the viewer confronts or acknowledges (or not) desire for cinema including the 'joy of looking', that is a question of cultural politics. Radical puritanism is precisely what my paper criticised by arguing against the various 'covers' auteurs had sought to provide for deriving pleasure from these films. And 'radical puritanism' is precisely what Paul Kerr falls back on in his instinctive, unthinkingly negative reaction to the mere phrase 'the politically irresponsible joy of looking'. Because, surely, Paul Kerr, who constantly refers to the need to understand cultural phenomena historically, cannot object to my characterisation of cinephilia, the historically determinate regime of scopophilia associated with ambitious B movies, as precisely historical and thus liable to change and even disappearance, as I pointed out in the lines Paul Kerr quoted and then drastically misconstrued.

I welcome, as I did three years ago, Paul Kerr's 'ambition to call into question the predictable... promotion of Lewis to the auteur pantheon'. In fact, I doubt that such a promotion in fact did happen, but I wonder why he thought it 'predictable'? There is nothing in his article that even begins to suggest why precisely Lewis' films became an issue in Britain in 1979-80 and, who knows, again in 1983. What is the cultural politics at stake in the demonstration of the

Lewis-style/look here and now? Avoiding these questions may not be in the best interest of the film history and film studies Paul Kerr sets such great store by. It could be that my identification of cinephilia, i.e. the reaction against the puritanism and the literariness inherent in most cinema – from independent to Art to mainstream cinema – and in most writing about cinema – from reviewing to oppositional and academic writing – as a crucial issue was mistaken. But on the evidence of the bitterness of Paul Kerr's abusive language in an otherwise admirable article, and on the evidence of glaring misreadings of statements quoted in his own article, combined with the equally impressive weakness and at times self-defeating nature of his 'refutations', I am now more convinced than I was three years ago, largely thanks to Paul Kerr's own work, that the desire for cinema, the 'joy of looking' does indeed constitute a neurotic knot in English film culture today. Why this should be so at a time when the literary ideology is more pervasively in command than it was at any time in the last 30 years and when rumours of the demise of cinema itself are threatening to come true, is material for another article.

#### Paul Kerr replies:

Paul Willemen usefully identifies a number of areas of agreement between us as well as pointing to several weaknesses in my article. Briefly, my remarks about the small quantity of prints struck, the brevity of initial runs and the relative paucity of critical coverage of Lewis' films were never meant to be taken for 'sufficient explanation' for Lewis' status as 'virtually unknown', as an almost 'unreadable author'. Here perhaps reference to my earlier article about the *B film noir* might have been pertinent. Equally briefly, my mention of Lewis' occasional collaborations with blacklisted was emphatically not intended to 'prove' the 'progressiveness' or otherwise of the films. Rather, the suggestion, admittedly a tentative one, was that the coincidence of McCarthyism with the latter days of *B film*-making enabled low budget productions to hire 'top talent' (in Navasky's terms) for 'minimal money'. Furthermore, the very anonymity of these contributions underlines the general inappropriateness of credit-scanning as an explanatory enterprise for cinema. Thirdly, with regard to my unsub-

stantiated 'evaluations' of those contributions, Willemen is right to note a slippage between my summary of the current cinephile consensus about Lewis' films and my own attitudes.

As I (mis)understand it, Willemen's argument that Lewis' films function as objects of cinephiliac pleasure par excellence, since they are films entirely 'without cover', without the sort of secondary elaboration supplied by the serious subject, the great performance, the literary dialogue, progressive politics and so on, is persuasive as polemic but inadequate as analysis. This is why I wanted to 'defend' the contributions of some of Lewis' collaborators and to question the ideological designation Willemen awards all of the films. Furthermore, I would argue that the visual style of Lewis' *B film noirs* (and it was after all this specific aspect of and perspective on his work that my article took) is often precisely motivated in – and a motif of – the *noir* milieu in which the protagonists are trapped and/or framed.

A connected problem here is with what Willemen seems to be saying about 'the joy of looking' being 'politically irresponsible'. Does he mean that it is, in contemporary Anglo-American culture, simply an unsanctified aesthetic activity? That it is an activity entirely outside politics? Or that it is inherently, universally and always an exercise in reactionary, ostrich politics? Of course, the French critical impetus in favour of auteurs over *metteurs-en-scène* and the fashion for *film noir* were and are historically and culturally determinate. But that does not necessitate the ultimate redundancy of the texts themselves; entirely other functions have already been served by Lewis' films – which is why I quoted Steve Jenkins' remarks in my earlier article. Lewis' films, like Lang's, occupy

*a space where a multiplicity of discourses intersect, an unstable, shifting configuration of discourses produced by the interaction of a specific group of films with particular historically and socially locatable ways of reading/viewing those films.*

In Lewis' case there have been readings from surrealists (unsurprisingly stressing the sublime, extraordinary and apparently unmotivated moments in the films); from auteurists (celebrating some of the same moments while striving for a satisfying structural-thematic cover to conceal



them, as it were, under one authorial elastoplast); from would-be film-makers (like Bogdanovich, teasing out lessons about creativity in constraint, economy of expression, for practical application perhaps when working for Roger Corman); from critics of the western (like William K. Everson, whose books on the genre all include flattering remarks about Lewis' contribution to it); from historians of the stylistic development of the American cinema (like Barry Salt, who has expressed considerable enthusiasm for Lewis); from television auteurs – or as Paul Willemen describes them telephiliacs (witness the encyclopedia of American TV directors, *The American Vein*); as well as from opponents of the liberal, literal climate of film culture which still dominates film-making and film criticism in Britain (and which Paul Willemen sketches admirably in his reply).

That climate is presently epitomised in England by the activities of Channel 4, which combines a commitment to new British cinema with seasons like 'The Worst of Hollywood' and 'What the Censor Saw' and whose presenters habitually mock the 'old films' (like Lewis' *My Name is Julia Ross*) they screen. Even the celebrated Film on Four slot turns out to be little more than another Play for Today anthology, shot on film but dominated by the aesthetics and personnel of English literary and theatrical culture.

Which brings me to Paul Willemen's second charge concerning my undeniable failure to adequately locate the outbreaks of Lewis-cinephilia (the latter term's spurious scientificity inviting such medical metaphors all too readily): Paul Willemen is clearly correct to note the absence in my article of any real attempt to outline such contexts – indeed his own remarks are undoubtedly an excellent start. I had hoped that the reproduction of the two *Time Out* reviews and the placing of my article in an issue of *Screen*, which anthologised several pieces about British film and television culture would do the job for me. Certainly, however, I should have described

the regime of taste into which those two reviews and indeed the re-released films themselves intervened.

In Britain, for instance, while the vaults of Hollywood's theatrical holdings have become increasingly available to television, the filmgoing experience itself has been in drastic decline. The fact that this decline has coincided with the expansion of film studies, of retrospective screenings and of academic journals, however, has not been addressed. If, as reception theory proposes, the concept of genre, for example, is to be understood not only in terms of texts and contexts of production but also of the contexts of distribution and exhibition as well as of the critical discourses that surround them, then this coincidence cannot be overemphasised. The colonisation of cinema – by the academy, by television, by video and by cable – has so fundamentally altered the experience of cinema or, rather, of films that the very categories within which we are used to comprehending and conceiving them must be entirely overhauled. The popularity of television programmes like 'Clive James at the Movies' and 'The Worst of Hollywood', combined with the prevalence of movie ephemera and the proliferation of film star biographies and photo-books, reveal the extent to which the cultural conjuncture has shifted. Today, 'old Hollywood films' and 'classical American cinema' alike inhabit an arena that (the work of the academy notwithstanding) has been totally transformed, just as was the status of the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction.

In the light of these developments, Paul Willemen's confidence in the imminent redundancy of Lewis' films, and, by implication, of auteurism itself, may be misplaced. Whether a resuscitation of authorial approaches to cinema or indeed an application of the cinephiliac impulse to television or even to pop videos is politically desirable is, of course, open to question. That they are simply impossible – as Willemen argues – is no more than wishful thinking.

The questions raised by Mary Joannou and Steve McIntyre in their report on the BFI's Biopic Conference ('Lust for Lives', vol 24 nos 4-5) are significant for the Left and for Media Studies. However, I should like to advance some constructive criticisms of their work.

First, I feel their discussion of the biopic as a genre fails to come to grips with the real issues involved by quibbling over possible taxonomies. Certainly the fact that biopics may be defined as those films having as their main character a real person cannot be dismissed as 'a singularly unhelpful criterion'. As a criterion it is perhaps as good as any other. Of course, as Joannou and McIntyre rightly point out, it cannot be made to include films that do not have real persons as their main characters, nor can it be made to include films that have real persons as their main characters but treat of their lives in wholly fictionalised ways. But to say this is to begin to show us how helpful the notion of a biopic genre may be. What Joannou and McIntyre are criticising here is not really the notion of a biopic genre, or even of such a genre as defined by a real person protagonist, but the notion of genre as taxonomy, as prescriptive norm or descriptive category.

The notion of genre, whether it be that of the biopic or the western, is helpful to the extent that it can be related to the meanings generated by the text at hand, and not to the extent that it can be inflated to subsume all other genres nor to the extent that it can be endlessly subdivided. The task that confronts us is not that of parodying certain intellectual tools, but of finding out what work can be done with them. If we choose to define a biopic as a film dealing with the life of a real protagonist, our choices may well lead to the illumination of significant relationships previously obscure. And if certain films cannot be easily excluded from or included in our category that does not automatically lead us to give up our definition. Indeed, such grey cases are the challenge and confirmation of genre theory. Perhaps Tzvetan's Todorov's *The Fantastic*, or his essay on detective fiction found in *The Poetics of Prose*, best illustrate my point.

Second, Joannou and McIntyre criticise Merz's use of 'romantic' unfairly. They argue that 'she sees Carlyle as the representative of a biographic-

al emphasis in history, claiming that this was characteristic of a romanticism attempting to re-establish individualism in a society where this seemed under threat.' And they object on the grounds that 'Romanticism... as an ideology in Britain... was an opposition to the rampant individualism inherent in bourgeois Enlightenment thinking.' Such an objection, however, is more apparent than real. While Romanticism, British or otherwise, opposed the individualism of the Enlightenment, of rationalism and self-interest, it did so by endorsing a religion of the individual, an identification of the one and the many, and thus the status of the Romantic movement as either a reaction against or a refinement on the great bourgeois revolutions is left in doubt. Whereas Romanticism can be seen as opposing individualism, it can just as easily be seen as a license for rampant individualism with Carlyle championing men like Frederick the Great of Prussia because they were great individuals.

Third, 'Lust for Lives' addresses itself to what may be called the essential appeal of the biopic. Merz has it that 'success or failure is judged on whether it creates a coherent personality', and Joannou and McIntyre endorse this position by raising a further question, 'How does the biopic operate to construct this unitary individual?' It may be usefully questioned how essential these concerns are for the audience, or even for the makers of biopics. Certainly many viewers of biopics come for the music, the evocation of another time and place, the opportunity such films may offer for wish-fulfillment, or all sorts of other conscious and unconscious motivations. The mixed nature of biopics, the ways in which many of them try to maximise their audience numbers by drawing on popular songs, period detail, references to domestic arrangements, etc, are perhaps just as important, if not more important, than an underlying concern with creating 'a coherent personality'. The biopic is a popular and rather unselfconscious genre and, while its characteristic individualism is persistent and pervasive, it is by no means consistent or always central.

Associated with this issue of the importance of a coherently presented protagonist is the contrast between cinematic representations and real life: 'The problem... is to establish how a closed discourse centering on the individual is constructed out of the open facts of a real life.' The way

86 Joannou and McIntyre raise the question cuts off, I think, the most fruitful lines of investigation. What is meant here by 'open facts'? Especially as it is contrasted with 'closed discourse'? Certainly 'life' and 'art', the 'lived' and the 'represented', interpenetrate in numerous ways, on numerous levels, and in such a fashion as to often be inseparable. While *Madame Curie*, *A Coal Miner's Daughter*, *The Buddy Holly Story*, and *A Star is Born* certainly construct lives, these constructs are perhaps no more artificial than those constructed by the individuals with which they concern themselves. *Madame Curie*, the

film, constructs 'a dedicated scientist' for us, its audience, and *Madame Curie*, the woman, certainly constructed, if her own words are to be taken in evidence, 'a dedicated scientist' for herself, and 'plotted' her life accordingly. The contrast between 'the film' and 'the woman' is not absolute, but relative, a contrasting of one construct against another, and not a contrasting of one construct and the unconstructed. Whereas the cinema is most certainly a representation, it is not that which represents the once present, but that which represents the already represented.

### From Vincent Porter, 19 Wentworth Mansions, London NW3:

Andrew Higson's extensive review of the BFI Dossier on *Gainsborough Melodrama* and *British Cinema History* ('Critical Theory and "British Cinema"', vol 24 nos 4-5) imposes a reading of *British Cinema History* which is not substantiated by the text, and proposes in its place an idealist theoretical project which is unlikely ever to be realised and has certainly not been achieved so far. In so doing, he is not only in danger of misrepresenting *British Cinema History* to your readers, but, perhaps more seriously, of implying that film theory can offer more to film history than it has yet achieved and that its potential for developing an independent cinema and film culture is more significant than is in fact the case.

The first thing that needs to be emphasised is that *British Cinema History* is a collection of essays by different authors who have different areas of interest and expertise and many of whom hold widely differing critical positions. Certainly the organisation of the book is based on what might loosely be termed a sociological model, but not one in which 'the ideological work of the text is thus fixed prior even to the emergence of the text as such' (p 84) and certainly not one which 'moves on to a second stage where the "effects" of the "content" of these "finished products" upon the audience are constructed' (ibid). Such a position would be sociologically untenable. It is precisely Higson's attempt to extend beyond its epistemological limits the sociological organisational principle which the book adopts which unbalances his review. James Curran and I are well aware that

the procrustean bed of the simple sociological model into which Higson wants to force us cannot provide all the answers in the study of film. We were well aware of this when we commissioned essays by Trevor Ryan, Janet Woollacott, Simon Blanchard and Sylvia Harvey in which 'a critique of this sociological model begins to emerge' (p 84), those by Ian Green and John Hill in which 'there is the basis on which to transform "British cinema" as an object for (such) film theory' (p 85) and that by Raymond Williams of which 'we have taken no heed' (p 93).

I stand accused of contributing an essay which is 'exemplary of the sociological approach of the book' (p 85) in which 'the question of contradictions, tensions or excess threatening to rupture the filmic system cannot be entertained' (p 86). There are two points to be made here. The first is the appropriateness of yoking together a social and historical overview of a studio or genre with the detailed analysis of a film text in an essay of this length in a book aimed at a reasonably broad readership. How and why is the given film text to be chosen? What are the grounds for deeming it to be typical of a broader output, or citing it as the exception that proves a more general claim to be true? The second concerns the appropriateness, at an epistemological level, of combining contextual and textual analyses without some careful consideration of the problems involved. It made more sense therefore to signal a different mode of analysis of Ealing comedy by footnoting a reference to Ian Green's essay. This was not, as Higson would have it, 'predictably the most minimal link' (p 86), but a perfectly normal way to signal the connections between different essays

in the book – a method that was also used to signal the link between the essays by Stuart Hood and Trevor Ryan.<sup>1</sup>

Higson's strictures about the lack of detailed textual analysis in *British Cinema History* lead him to propose an alternative structure which deals with 'the question of the relation between the productivity of the text and the meta-psychology of the spectator and the way in which the spectator is positioned in the enunciative address of the text and the critical discourses which circumscribe the meaning of the text' (p 85, my emphases). We are on dangerously slippery ground here for, not only does he cheerfully bundle together four widely differing analytical methods into an apparently unproblematic and seamless whole, but he gives no consideration as to *how* this might be achieved. More seriously, he appears not to have taken on board the implications of the debate which took place in the pages of *Screen* in 1978-79 – the implications of which were spelt out by Nicholas Garnham in 'Subjectivity, Ideology, Class and Historical Materialism' (vol 20 no 1). I will not bore readers of *Screen* by reiterating Garnham's arguments at length, but merely point out that in debates concerning the relationship between different levels of analysis (the economic, the political, the ideological etc.) that 'levels are not actual social practices but analytically distinct perspectives upon concrete social phenomena which are at one and the same time economic, ideological and political' (Garnham, p 129).

It is within this context that I find Higson's aspirations for his particular mode of film history dangerously idealist. For in rejecting the 'dominant' view of cinema history and in attacking 'the sociological model' he overemphasises the potential openness of film texts to a range of readings. The purpose of film history is not to 'fulfil the cinephile's desires of serious British film critics' (p 80), nor to 'provide the critic with a new domain of pleasure' (ibid), but to understand and assess the role of film in British society and its historical development.

According to Higson,

*At the same time, more orthodox film criticism has always found an interest in British cinema – or, to be more precise, a certain conception of 'British cinema', dominated by a realist aesthetic initially articulated for the feature film, in conjunction with a concern to produce 'quality' British films in the*

*1940s. It is in part the massive dominance of this orthodoxy and its conception of British cinema that has until recently effectively defined British cinema as outside the concerns of the radical film theorist. Now this orthodoxy is being challenged, and alternative ways of making sense of British cinema are being developed. In particular the question of how to produce a cinema and film culture independent and distinct from Hollywood can be reconsidered: previously this has been thought through in terms of building a 'national cinema', but such a project is always dependent on constructing an imaginary homogeneity of identity and culture in relation to cinema, on celebrating and promoting a particular conception of 'British cinema'.* (pp 80-81)

It is necessary to quote this passage at length, in order to signal the moves in Higson's argument which moves from 'orthodox film criticism' to its challenge by 'the radical film theorist' to producing 'a cinema and film culture independent and distinct from Hollywood'. If film culture is to mean more than a few critics writing reviews to each other which fulfil their cinephile's desires or provide them with a new domain of pleasure, then the economic and political problems involved in building an independent cinema and film culture have to be taken on board as well as the ideological. This, the shifts in Higson's argument signally fail to do. What is more, it is hard to see how a new independent cinema and film culture can be built without consideration of the sociological concerns of which Higson is so dismissive.

<sup>1</sup> In a cryptic footnote, Higson claims that the similarities between my essay and Charles Barr's work on Ealing and David Pirie's work on Hammer 'remain substantially unacknowledged'. It is not clear to me what he means by 'remain substantially', but for me Barr's and Pirie's books are pioneering works in their areas. I don't therefore feel the need to cite them at every turn. I have used both books extensively in teaching courses in these areas since they were published and it was clear to me when I was researching the essay that in many cases we were working over similar source material. When I wanted to refer to a specific point I preferred to cite the original source and where I was conscious of quoting them, the source was footnoted as such. While, however, I remain sympathetic to much of what they say, it should be clear to anyone who has read their books that my concern was to emphasise the similarities in the organisation of the two studios and to stress the ways in which the various writers and directors working there were only a part of the economic and ideological nexus presided over by the two producers involved.

I would not, of course, expect Vincent Porter to agree with the tenets of my review of *British Cinema History*. Clearly his letter is very much within the same terms of reference as that volume's editorialising. However, I think it is worth making a few comments on what I see as being at stake in our disagreements, which are neither new nor unique. *Screen's* project over the last ten years or so has always been subject to such dissensions – but unlike Porter, I do not believe that Nicholas Garnham's accusations of idealism in *Screen* (vol 20 no 1) in any sense put the last nail in the coffin.

One of the major disagreements between Porter's position and my own concerns the status of film history, which Porter, in the opening paragraph of his letter, attempts to separate from film theory, as if the former were able to achieve some neutral, unmediated vision of the past. Hence his dismissal of my attempt to re-theorise the institution of British cinema in a way that might avoid the pitfalls of sociology/economism and the dominant realist aesthetic of

British film criticism. And hence also his refusal to accept that the editorial structuring of *British Cinema History* serves only to reproduce those ideologies.

Despite our disagreements, I still think that the collection is, as I said in my review, 'a welcome addition to the growing body of work on British cinema'. But I also think that the ways in which cinema is theorised by the organisation and argumentation of the book need to be laid bare, and some alternative position offered. Porter may think that the purpose of the film historian is 'to understand and assess the role of film in British society and its historical development'. *Screen's* task, however, must be to work towards transforming the role of film in society, to help build an independent cinema and film culture. This involves thoroughly challenging the traditional ways in which, for instance, British cinema has been conceptualised. But this certainly does not mean that I believe, as Porter suggests, that economic and political questions can be dispensed with, or that the readings to which a film text is open are not contained by the forms of the cinema institution.

#### CORRECTION

An important phrase was erroneously omitted from 'Colonialism, Racism and Representation' by Robert Stam and Louise Spence (volume 24 number 2, March-April 1983). A sentence on page 4 should read: 'Amerindians were called "beasts" and "cannibals" because white Europeans were slaughtering them and expropriating their land; blacks were slandered as "lazy" because their labour was being exploited; Mexicans were derided because the United States had seized half of their territory; and the colonised were ridiculed as lacking in culture and history because colonialism, in the name of profit, was destroying the basis of that culture and the memory of that history.'

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